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The Dread Rider; OR, THE TEXAN DUELIST.

BY GEORGE W. BROWNE.

PROLOGUE.

"A stranger tale ne'er graced the poet's art,
And fiction never played a wilder part."

I.

SUNSET.

The spirit of the dying day ebbing out in a flood of golden light, streams athwart the western sky from the horizon almost to the zenith. Majestic Mississippi, "Father of the Waters," like a funeral train is moving sluggishly on in a lonely way toward the sea.

Suddenly, a human form is mirrored in Nature's solemn scene; a fairy figure glides to the brink of the somber waters; a woman's voice breaks the stillness.

"Oh, Father in Heaven, look down in pity upon me! Forgive me, forgive me! but betrayed, deserted, spurned by parents, and scorned by the world, life is a burden I can no longer bear! Oh, mother, father, forget your erring child, and the wrongs she has done you! In her silent grave let her faults and crimes be hidden! Oh, perfidious man! you know not what you have done; you know not the anguish of a broken heart! But it will soon be over. Home, friends, joy and sorrow, I bid you all adieu, forever—ever!"

A sudden splash, a few tiny bubbles rising to the surface, and the placid river sweeps on as tranquil as before.

MIDNIGHT. II.

Partially obscured by fleeting, hazy clouds, the great, round moon floats high in the heavens, looking down upon a settler's humble cabin far away on the bank of the lonely Red river.

Its inmates wrapped in the quiet of repose, the forest home stands like a sentinel in the pale moonlight. Around, the encircling timber casts its sable gloom far out over the clearing, while through the tree-tops the wild wind surges in musical tones.

Out from the somber growth steal a dozen dark objects—forms of crouching men. Swiftly they glide across the opening.

The lone cabin is quickly reached. No barrier stays their onward course. With bitter maledictions, they force an entrance, and the defenseless occupants are aroused from their slumber to find themselves rudely seized and borne from their couches of rest.

Midst shrieks, and curses, and shots, and fierce fighting, they are dragged out into the night.

In spite of tears, and pitiful entreaties, the fair wife and

a helpless babe are stricken down with cruel blows. In desperation, the man tries to hurl aside his foes; as well to battle with fate.

Up from the dwelling, only a moment ago a happy home, springs a cloud of smoke and forked tongues of fire; rapidly spreading, leaping higher and higher, till the building is one living sheet of flame.

Away from the heat of the glaring furnace, the midnight fiends bear their victim.

Over the branch of a neighboring tree a coil of rope is thrown. One end is secured in a noose around the captive's neck. Willing hands seize the other, and, covered with blood from ghastly wounds, weak, faint, yet still struggling, suffering untold agony, he is swung into mid-air!

With a flood of silvery light, the moon darts from her retreat, and the flames, with increased fury, flash higher than ever, gleaming far above the tree-tops. In weird, fantastic hues, the elements blending glare for a moment upon the scene, disclosing in fearful distinctness, the bodies of the murdered wife and babe, the husband's lifeless form dangling from its support, and the figures of the marauding

demons skulking away into the shadows of the forest; and then, as if blinded by the frightful spectacle, the moon is veiled in darkness, and the fire dies to smoldering embers. All is shrouded in gloom, and bound by a deathly stillness, save the wind sighing a mournful requiem.

CHAPTER I.

THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER.

The scenes of our story are, for the most part, laid on the Texas border, during the reign of the rifle and bowie. Thus, if any of the incidents we shall portray may seem too startling to be real, too strange to be true, we wish it to be borne in mind that they occurred when the Lone Star State was in its darkest hour, when robbers and outlaws made up a good share of its inhabitants, when deeds of lawlessness were everyday occurrences, when no man felt safe at home or abroad without his trusty "guards"—rifle and bowie.

Shelby county, lying in western Texas, on the border of that wild and broken tract of country known as the "Red Lands,"

was, in 1839, rather thinly populated; and the most important settlement to be found in the whole county was Chesterville, situated near Chester Plain, in its extreme western part, and only two hours' ride from the border of the "Red Lands." In and around this settlement the scenes of our narrative are laid.

Our story opens at a shooting-match, which is being held back of Chesterville, where nearly all of the male inhabitants of that place have congregated, to "try their hand." A shooting-match was not in those days an uncommon affair, yet, no matter how often they occurred, there were always pleasure and excitement enough about them to warrant a full attendance.

Among the most prominent at the match, and comprising about one-half of those there assembled, were a score of men, self-styled "Rangers and Regulators," who had banded together for the protection of the settlement against the depredations of outlaws who had been harassing the country, and who were supposed to have their rendezvous somewhere in the wilds of the Red Lands. In fact, these Regulators had but just returned from an unsuccessful expedition against these outlaws, and were now making up for their defeat by trying their skill at target-shooting.

One by one the men had taken their turn and some splendid shots had been made, but when the others saw the leader of the Regulators, Curtis Dash, come forward to try his never-failing rifle, they knew that defeat awaited them, for Curt Dash was considered the best shot in Shelby county.

In appearance, Curt Dash presented a perfect model of manly beauty; he was a little above medium height and size; his features were regular, and extremely handsome; his face was cleanly shaven, with the exception of a glossy brown mustache and imperial, which seemed to give firmness to his pleasant coun-



THE DUELISTS CLUTCH THEIR RIFLES, BUT SHOW NO SIGNS OF FEAR. THE SILENCE UPON THE SCENE IS PERFECT—THE SUSPENSE, TERRIBLE.

tenance and enhance his good looks. But there was, nevertheless, a sort of haughtiness about him which would not strike a stranger favorably; however, this, upon closer acquaintance, would seem to wear away, and he would become a true friend, but as an enemy he was to be dreaded. He had his faults as well as other men, and most prominent among them was the pride he possessed in his skill as a marksman. Nothing would wound his feelings, or excite his enmity so quickly as to depreciate his skill with the rifle. His friends knew this, and, accordingly, never spoke of his marksmanship, except to praise. A man of a reckless devil-may-care air, with a character as varied as the changes of nature; a man of indomitable will and iron resolution; a man of the peculiar stamp so often found in border life;—such was Curt Dash, the leader of the Regulators.

Dash took his position upon the shooting-stand; and, after taking careful and deliberate aim, sent a ball crashing through the target.

Scarcely had the report of his rifle died away, when eager friends seized the target and brought it forward for the inspection of the crowd; he had made the best shot of the day. The edge of the bullet had cut the center mark.

So absorbed was the assembly in examining the target, and praising the skill of their leader that no one saw the approach of a horseman, till suddenly a loud laugh rung out upon the air; and looking up they beheld, standing scarcely a rod from them, a strange horseman. He was a man of medium size, and with a frame compactly built. There was nothing in his dress to excite wonder; but there *was* something in his wild looks not to be forgotten. Once he may have been handsome; but that day was past. His skin, naturally dark, was tanned and sun-burned till it was of an almost blackened hue; his hair, which had been jet black, was now of an iron-gray, hanging down over his shoulders in long, tangled masses. In his full black eyes, which seemed to pierce the observer through and through, burned deep the slumbering fires of insanity. His quite prominent nose, was the only feature that remained unmarred. But, as if to make up for this lenity, time had placed a terrible disfigurement upon his face, in the shape of a huge, blood-red scar, which extended diagonally across his right cheek, adding an awful expression to his otherwise wild and unnatural appearance. And, not seeming satisfied with what Nature and Time and, perhaps, something else had done for him, he wore, as if to lend additional terror to his looks, a heavy, fierce-looking, coal-black mustache, whose flowing ends fell down upon his breast.

He was mounted upon a powerfully built, fleet-footed, dark-roan steed, which, like its rider, apparently was endowed with a wild, restless spirit.

The stranger's only weapon of defense was a long, heavy, dark-stained, single-barreled rifle, which he handled with the skill of an experienced rifleman.

The silence which had fallen upon the crowd was broken by the strange horseman exclaiming:

"What have you there?"

"A specimen of my skill with the rifle," answered Curt, seizing the target and holding it before the stranger.

"Bah!" exclaimed the horseman, contemptuously, hardly deigning to notice the board, "you don't boast of *such* shooting as that I hope!"

"It would puzzle that rusty barrel of yours to beat it!" exclaimed Curt.

"It would be nothing to boast of," answered the stranger, with a scornful laugh, which sent Dash's hot blood tingling through his veins.

"We should like to see some of your vaunted skill. Dare you show it?"

"I am always ready to prove my words, and if I don't beat that bungling shot, my finger shall never press the trigger again."

"Enough said, stranger," cried Curt; "now we only want the proof. Here, Trask," he added, turning to one of the Regulators, "put

up another target, and we'll see if we are going to be outdone by this unnamed braggart."

The crowd had maintained silence, watching the scene with strange interest, and then the Regulators gathered around their leader with words of encouragement.

Trask soon announced the target ready, when the stranger turned in his saddle, as if going to shoot without dismounting.

"What! not going to dismount?" demanded one of the Regulators.

"No! I always shoot from the horse," replied the stranger, turning his roan half round, as he spoke, when it was seen for the first time that he was maimed. *His left leg was gone above the knee!*

Turning his horse back to its former position, the unknown brought his rifle to shoulder, and, for an instant, the livid scar upon his cheek was pressed upon its stock; then, a sharp, ringing report.

The target was quickly seized and brought forward: the stranger's bullet had driven the center-cross clear out. Curt Dash's shot was fairly beaten!

Curt Dash stood motionless as a statue, the color coming and going from his face, his gaze fixed intently upon his strange victor; then in a calm, measured tone he said:

"It was a chance shot. You can't do it again, Mister One Leg. I will wager my rifle!"

"Pshaw!" cried the stranger, "because you can't shoot you think it something wonderful. I can do it a thousand times, without once missing. Put up that board again, twice as far off as before, and I will show you something worth boasting about."

While a new target was being put up, One Leg commenced to reload his rifle; but, in the act of taking a bullet from his pouch, it slipped from his fingers and dropped to the earth.

One of the regulators picked it up, and noticed that it was of a peculiar color; and after hastily examining it, exclaimed:

"A copper bullet, as true as I am a living sinner!"

"Yes," answered the man of mystery, while a strange light lit up his features, making him look like a smiling demon; "*I always use copper bullets!*"

"Ah!" exclaimed an old mountaineer, known as Gil Rey, of Rocky Mountain fame, "none but Greasers and cowardly sneaks use *poison* bullets."

One Leg bestowed upon him a look of malignant scorn, then turned to his rifle, when again that frightful scar pressed upon its stock; again the sharp *spang*, and again the copper bullet cut clear the center-cross!

"Now, boaster, are you satisfied?" asked he of the roan steed, as the excited company examined the board.

"By heavens!" cried Curt Dash, fiercely, as, goaded to desperation, he no longer tried to control his passion; "this is not boy's play! You can't shoot like that *before* the muzzle!"

"My rifle never fails me," retorted the other, quickly, "whether pointed at a board or a yelping cur."

"By lightning, Cap!" cried one of the Regulators, burly Hank Webber, whose gigantic form towered head and shoulders above all the others, as he pushed through the crowd toward the stranger, before Curt had time to speak or act, "let me go for the wall-eyed cuss! No man can talk *that* language here and live, while I'm 'round!"

"Hold on, Hank!" cried Curt; "I think I can handle Mister One Leg, if he did beat me at the target. It is my quarrel, and I must have the first try."

"Well, Cap, I s'pose it will have to be as you say, but I should like to git one lift at him," replied the giant, withdrawing.

"Stranger," cried the Regulator chief, turning to the horseman, "you have insulted me; I demand satisfaction. I challenge you to meet me before the muzzle. If you are not a coward, you will accept."

Without seeming to notice the hot words of the angry Texan, the stranger commenced to

reload his rifle, not appearing to know or care that there was a score of men in that excited band only waiting a word from their leader to rush upon him and rend him limb from limb.

As soon as his rifle was carefully loaded, the Unknown, as if enjoying the terrible suspense, turned slowly upon Curt, saying:

"Very well, my obliging bantam, I am ready for you, *now!*"

"Not now!" cried Curt. "I am not prepared. But in the morning I will be ready for you; and will meet you on this place."

"All right," said the stranger; "any way to accommodate. But, remember, I must meet you upon horse," and he pointed to his missing leg, significantly.

"It matters not to me how I meet you."

"As I am a stranger in this place, perhaps some of you will be kind enough to tell me where I can find food for my horse and lodging for myself to-night," said the stranger.

"You will find all you want at Burley's Prairie Home," answered Mark Waring. "A part of us are going there now, and you can accompany us."

The shooting match had come to a sudden and unexpected end.

CHAPTER II.

THE DUEL.

AN ordinary duel on the Texas border was only of passing moment; but this one between the Regulator chief and the one-legged stranger was of more than common importance; and the next day's rising sun beheld men gathering from every quarter, till such a multitude was upon the spot as had never been seen on Chester Border. All of Chesterville was there, and from neighboring sections of the county, to which the news had spread like wildfire, parties had congregated, all anxiously waiting for the appearance of the duelists, who had not yet arrived.

The crowd was not kept in suspense long, for soon the dashing, handsome figure of Curt Dash, upon his spirited bay gelding, was seen approaching at a smart canter; and but a short distance behind came the mysterious One Leg, erect as a centaur upon his powerful, dark-red roan.

The arrival of the duelists was the signal for action, as the appointed time was up; and while the curious spectators were watching the strange horseman, and admiring the coolness and splendid bearing of the Regulator chief, Gil Rey and Mark Waring, who had been chosen to act as seconds, were measuring off the ground, and making other preparations for the coming combat.

When every thing was in readiness, the parties were requested to take their position, which was to be about sixty yards apart, each turned back to the other; and after counting the usual number, three, Gil Rey was to give the word for them to turn and fire as they advanced. If the first attempt should fail to unhorse one or both, it was to be repeated, for they could fire but once at a time, as the stranger carried a single-barreled rifle.

Curt Dash had already made arrangements with his friends to see that his few last requests should be faithfully executed, in case he should fall, and was now impatient to have the affair over. But the Unknown seemed regardless of what the consequences might be to him, and was about to silently take his position, when his second, Mark Waring, reminded him of it by saying:

"Stranger, as your second in this affair, I feel it my duty to ask if you have no last request to make, for, not knowing what the result may be, it is best to be prepared for the worst. Anything you desire I will do, if you will make it known."

"Thank you, friend, if I can take the liberty to call you such," answered the other; "I have one request to make. If I fall, please see that my body has proper burial. I wish that I may lie by the edge of yonder chaparral."

ral, if it is not asking too much. For your trouble, I give you my noble horse."

"Have you no message to leave for any one?" asked Waring, as the other hesitated.

"No," answered the mysterious man, almost sadly; "there is not a single person in the whole wide world to whom it matters whether I live or die."

At last, all preliminaries are ended; the combatants have taken their places, and the anxious, excited crowd is impatiently waiting for the signal-word to be given, thinking not, caring not, in their excitement, that it is to sign the death-warrant of one or both of the men before them, only wishing to hear it that the suspense may be broken, the result known.

Every eye is turned upon the horsemen, continually changing from one to the other. But, not a tremor is seen upon either. Both, alike, seem ready and waiting for the crisis. They are well matched; the only advantage being in favor of the Unknown, whose horse is better trained than the Texan's high-spirited steed; yet, the Regulator is a splendid rider.

Standing at an equal distance from either adversary, so as to be heard by both alike, Gil Rey is ready for his part of the work; and in a clear, distinct tone, he commences:

"One!"

Like a knell, the word rings out with awful distinctness.

"Two!"

The duelists clutch their rifles, but show no signs of fear. The silence upon the scene is perfect—the suspense, terrible.

"Three!"

Clear and distinct the monosyllable breaks upon the stillness, fairly stifling the bated breath of the lookers-on. The silence seems to crush everything; even the air is hot and heavy. Breathless the spectators stand riveted to the spot, until—

"Fire!"

The spell is broken; quick almost as the lightning's flash, the combatants wheel their horses; and as they come into position, each brings his rifle to the shoulder. But quick as **is** Curt Dash with his rifle, the Unknown is **even quicker**; and before the Regulator can bring his weapon to bear; the other pulls the trigger; a sharp *spang* rings out upon the still morning air. But, oh, stranger! where now is thy vaunted skill? for unurt, untouched, Curt Dash still sits upon his horse, pale as death, but firm as a rock. Instantly the Regulator's cheek presses his rifle-stock; his keen eye glances along its barrel; his finger pulls the trigger—a flash—a ringing report—and with a low groan his antagonist falls back upon the haunches of his horse, and slips to the earth.

As the stranger was seen to fall, a murmur of assent went up from the throng, which soon increased and grew into a mighty shout, repeated again and again, till the prairie seemed to echo the cry.

"Is he dead?" asked Curt Dash, as soon as the applause was over, riding forward to the spot which was now the center of an excited crowd.

"Yes, captain," answered Mark Waring, who had been the first to reach the stranger's side, and was already examining his wound; "your shot was a fatal one. A man shot straight through the heart can make but a small show for life, I am thinking."

"I wish it might have been different," said the Texan; "but he would have it so."

"Tut, tut, Cap!" exclaimed the redoubtable Hank Webber, "don't feel bad for what you done. The quarrel was of One Leg's own making, and he has been the loser."

The duel was over; and all seemed satisfied with the result. But with the sober second thought all boisterous rejoicing ceased. The first thought told them that their favorite was safe; the second, that his safety was due to the untimely end of his antagonist. Thus what their friend had gained another had lost, and the thought hushing all enthusiasm, the clamor was succeeded by silence.

After satisfying himself that the wound was

fatal, Waring carefully replaced the unfortunate man's clothing; and arising to his feet, turned to the company, saying:

"Well, boys, you know I promised the stranger that he should have proper burial, if affairs should turn as they have. Now, if some of you will lend your aid, we will do it at once, unless"—and he turned to the crowd—"there is some one here who is a friend or relative of the dead. If there is, that person will please come forward."

But no one answered the summons; none seemed to know of or care aught for the stranger, except that he was a human being; and seeing this, a couple of the Regulators took up his body and bore it away under the lead of Mark Waring, followed by those present, who fell into a long procession, a line of unweeping mourners.

During all this time, One Leg's horse had not moved from his tracks; but as he saw his master borne away, he gave a low whinny, and started to follow, when Gil Rey caught him by the bridle. This so frightened the steed that he reared and plunged furiously, till, suddenly, the bridle broke like rotten twine, and slipped from his head. Free! A wild snort, and the roan was fleeing over the plain at a mad gallop. To pursue would be useless, so the discomfited ex-mountaineer was fain to look at the broken bridle, and think of "what might have been."

With suitable tools and plenty of willing help it was the work of but a few minutes to prepare a grave for the unfortunate One Leg; then his body was placed alongside of the pit, a prayer was offered up for his soul's salvation by a fitting person; then the maimed body was lowered down to its last resting-place, when it was quickly hidden from all by the cold earth: One Leg, the Duelist was at rest!

After seeing the body covered with the loose earth, the crowd turned away, many of them seeking the Prairie Home, leaving Waring and another of the Regulators to fill up the grave, which was soon accomplished, when they two joined the others at the general rendezvous of Chesterville, to join in the "celebration" of the victory of Curt Dash, who now stood higher than ever in the estimation of his followers. But no one cared to think or speak of One Leg, the Unknown. He was a stranger who had died in a duel of his own provoking, and it was not for them to mourn for one who had said, himself, that it mattered not whether he lived or died.

Thus commenced and ended that strange duel, not one of all that crowd dreaming that it was but the beginning of a terrible epoch in the history of Chesterville. It was soon forgotten, and the lonely grave by the edge of Chester chaparral ceased to be even a "nine days' wonder."

Alas! many are the graves of unfortunate duelists covered by the long grass of Texas!

CHAPTER III.

MAN PROPOSES, WOMAN DISPOSES.

THE Prairie Home, owned by one of the leading men of Chesterville, Orman Burley, standing under the shading branches of a huge live-oak in the center of a small tract of prairie, a corner of Chester Plain, separated from the main body on the north by the chaparral already mentioned, was rightly named. Like a sentinel it stood, alone—a Prairie Home truly. Its nearest neighbor was a small plantation a quarter of a mile to the west, owned jointly by a couple of the Regulators, one our friend Mark Waring, and the other a coming acquaintance, Rock Randel, an ex-plains man better known by the *sobriquet* of Dandy Rock. Chesterville proper lay half a mile to the south, on the banks of the sluggish Rio Burte, which has its source back somewhere in the Red Lands. Half a mile to the east was Conrad Mansion, so called. A third of a mile nearly to the north of this, and a mile north-east of the Prairie Home, partially hidden from view by the straggling growth of *acacias* that surrounded it, stood the cortly residence of the

foremost ranchman in Shelby county, and one of the three first settlers of Chesterville, Col. Arthur L. Raymun. And here it is we would have the reader accompany us in imagination, for this is the home of one whom it is now our duty to introduce.

In the early dawn of womanhood, Bessie Raymun was the embodiment of perfect health. Of medium height, with a symmetrical form, a fair, pure complexion of a type midway between the blonde and the brunette, and a sweet, tender face with clearly-cut features, with darkly glowing eyes fringed with long, drooping lashes, with coral-tinted lips, and cheeks softly flushed with the hue of the rose, with a mass of long, glossy-brown hair falling about her neck and shoulders in becoming negligence, she was as graceful as a gazelle, as light-hearted as a bird, as lovely as a flower, and as spirited as an untamed antelope—a true daughter of the frontier—a model for the painter, a theme for the poet.

She was an only daughter—beg pardon, we came near forgetting a certain blue-eyed Alice, an adopted child, whom Colonel Raymun had picked up on Chester Plain, when but a wee bit of a babe, and tenderly cared for, giving her his name, and allowing her to share every privilege and advantage with his own, and who was expected to become a daughter in reality when the handsome, manly Walter should return from college. So we will say she was the daughter of kind, indulgent parents, sharing with an adopted sister all their great love and pride, knowing naught but happiness, and, apparently, a future as bright as the noonday sun.

Possessing, in addition to her personal charms, a liberal education, and accomplishments which the best might well envy, with a fair expectation of bringing to her husband elect a handsome dowry, it was no wonder that half of the marriageable men of Chesterville would have willingly laid their all at her feet; but it was a wonder that she—a woman—should have treated them all so nearly alike that even the shrewdest could not tell the favored one, though surmises were rife. To partially unfold the history and mystery of a young girl's heart, let us play the part of eavesdropper to a conversation between Col. Raymun and his daughter, in the arbor in front of the house where they have gone.

"Well, Bessie," the colonel is saying, "the captain comes to-day for his answer. I suppose you have decided ere this what it will be."

"Yes, father; my decision was made at the time. In fact, I gave Captain Dash to understand what he was to expect."

"What! do you still persist in that absurd aversion to one who is so worthy of your esteem? Why is it, when Captain Dash offers you so much—all that man can offer woman—that you treat him so lightly?"

"Father, although I highly respect Curtis Dash, I do not, and can not, love him as a wife ought to love a husband. Is not that sufficient reason?"

"Tut, tut, daughter! the captain's equal is not found in Chesterville. He is all I would ask for a son-in-law—a handsome, educated, accomplished, true-hearted, energetic man, with true military bravery and genius." (We must forgive the colonel if he slightly emphasizes the last part, as he is every inch a soldier, barely past the prime of life, with an enviable military record, won in defense of his country, under General Jackson, in his southern campaign.) "I know of no one so worthy of your hand; so throw aside your scruples—I know they are unfounded—and come to that decision which will be so gratifying to your mother and me, and which I doubt not will prove so satisfactory to yourself."

"Father, you know not what you are asking. It is not through any fault of his that I reject Captain Dash, for I consider him worthy of any woman's love; but—but—I do not love him."

"But why this change, Bessie? There was a time when you manifested a decided preference for the captain. Now, without giving a

single reason for the change, you almost ignore him. But, ah! let me see; if I remember rightly, this alteration began about the time that young Will Manners rescued you from the Rio Burte. Tell me, is it because you fancy another that the offer of Curt Dash is about to be rejected?"

We hear no reply, but a telltale blush answers what speech does not.

"Can it be that you prefer Will Manners to Captain Dash? I have nothing against Mr. Manners; as far as I know, he may be a good fellow; but he is young, inexperienced, and poor; he lacks, too, the captain's energy and firmness of character."

"But, father, he is honest and willing to try for himself."

"He may be, but we are hardly competent to judge, as it has been so short a time since we have known him. We do know the captain, and why should we throw away a certainty for an uncertainty? I will say there is not a man in all Chesterville whom I should rather have for—"

The sound of rapidly approaching footsteps interrupted the speech; and the next moment, the subject of their conversation, Curt Dash, appears upon the scene, with a—

"Beg pardon, colonel, Miss Raymun. I did not intend to intrude; but they told me I should find you in the grove, and thither I was bound."

"No need of apology, captain, for there has been no transgression, I assure you. In fact, Bessie and I were expecting your arrival, and our conversation was of you."

"Ah!" exclaims Curt, with a smile; "I can only hope it was for my good."

"It was of a matter of vital importance, which not only concerns you, but the future happiness of my daughter. We were speaking of that answer which I suppose you are expecting to receive. I can only hope, sir, it will be as favorable as you wish; but, as a gentleman, do not abuse this confidence."

A polite apology for withdrawing, from the colonel in his usual brusque way, and the Regulator chief is alone with his love—alone with his fate.

"Yes, Bessie—Miss Raymun," he cries, as the last sound of the colonel's footsteps die away in the distance, "your father was right; I have come for that answer you promised me to-day; and, judging by his tone, I am to expect a favorable one. Say, am I hoping in vain?"

A moment of painful embarrassment follows, broken at length by Miss Raymun's saying, in a low, beseeching tone:

"Oh, forgive me, Captain Dash, but much as it pains me to say it, I can not give you a favorable answer."

As the words so different from those expected fall from the other's lips, a shadow passes o'er the handsome features of the Regulator; but in a moment it is gone, when, seizing her hand, and dropping upon his knees before her, he cries in a quick, earnest voice:

"Do not say more, I entreat you. If it can not be 'yes,' do not say 'no.' It may be folly, it may be wrong, but I love you! I love you!"

Another moment of silence follows, as embarrassing as the first, when the speaker anxiously continues:

"Pardon me, Bess—Miss Raymun—I beseech you! I have been too hasty. You shall have more time—a week, a month, a year, to decide in; only give me hope. But speak, and say that I have not offended you!"

"No, no, not that, Captain Dash; but your words pain me. I—I can not answer you to-day."

"I will not ask you to, though I was expecting it; and you have given me reason to hope for a favorable one. If it were not rude, I would ask you why this change; but I will bide my time, hoping, ah! knowing, that it will not be in vain. You promise me this?" he half questions, half answers.

"I can not, can not promise! The time has been so short, and our acquaintance so brief, that I am not justified in giving you any hope, but I will try, try—"

Speech gives way to emotion, and the thought remains unspoken.

"Forgive me for the pain I have caused you," cries Curt, with increasing warmth; "but I feel that my case is not hopeless. I do not blame you for hesitating to answer one whose past history is so unknown as mine. But my love for you drove all this from my mind. It is true, I have come to you comparatively a stranger, for hitherto I have been compelled to remain silent upon the events of my past life. But, thank God, the time has at last come when I can throw off this cloak of silence and stand in my true character. Mine has been a strangely checkered career. Little of the pleasures of life have I known. Thrown upon the cold mercies of the world when but a youth; disowned and driven from home by my own father; an outcast, branded with the crime of another; a hunted, Cain-marked fugitive from justice—it is little wonder that I have grown reckless and nomadic, that my fellow men have styled me callous and turned against me, until I have come to care for naught but excitement to drown the cares and sorrows of life. But, thank Heaven, a brighter day is dawning. When spurned by parents and scorned by friends, I took an awful oath that I would never know rest or peace until the hand which blasted my life should meet its punishment. To fulfill this vow has been the great object of my life; and at last it seems almost accomplished, as I have found the very person for whom I have searched so long. I must prove his guilt to the world, and then I can return to the scenes of my boyhood, and remove the dark cloud that hangs over my name. Now that you know the substance of my past history, do not judge me harshly. I know that I have erred, but circumstances have driven me to it. A strange fatality has followed me through life like an evil thing. But its influence is nearly spent, and with your aid I will conquer it altogether, and become a better man—a man worthy of your esteem, whose greatest desire shall be for your happiness. It is true, I can not offer you at present even a name, for I acknowledge the one I bear is assumed; but I shall soon be able to prove to the world my innocence of the guilt of another, and reclaim my own. Then, with your love, I shall indeed be happy, and with the wealth I possess, for I am not so penniless as some have thought, the pleasantest home in Shelby county shall be ours; or, if you choose, we shall go back to the old homestead where I passed my childhood. It shall all be as you say, only remember that in your hands lies my future—upon your decision rest the prospects of my life. And when I come to you again for an answer, after I have cleared my name from the stigma that now hangs over it, I know you will not, can not refuse me; and then the brightest dream of my life will be realized. Do not forget the pleadings of my first and only love."

As the impetuous Regulator ceases speaking, he rises to his feet, and pressing the other's hand to his lips one moment, bids her "good-day," and is gone before she has time to utter a single word.

Left alone, our heroine seems to watch the space where her almost rejected lover had stood, until, as if overcome by some unseen power, she falls back upon the seat in a flood of tears, murmuring:

"Oh, Father in Heaven! guide me aright in this, for I know not my duty. I love him! and yet that other face and form will come before me! Can it be he cares for me! No! I must not think so. He will never know the sacrifice I make. Father is right, and I will do as he bids—accept the proud Regulator-chief—so noble! so true-hearted! I must! I will!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE PHANTOM RIDER.

AFTER leaving Bessie Raymun, Curt Dash sought his horse, which he had left at the stable; and vaulting into the saddle, he rides leisurely out upon Chester Plain. Rides leis-

urely because it best suits his mood. Buried in deep meditation, hardly noticing his course, he allows his steed to wander along the border of the plain in a westerly direction, until the colonel's hacienda is left far behind, and he is nearing the narrow belt of sparsely-grown, and low-limbed timber that skirts the banks of the Rio Burte. With an exclamation of surprise, he draws reins, and is about to turn back to the Prairie Home, when suddenly, ringing out upon the still afternoon air with startling distinctness, comes the sharp report of a rifle, and a bullet whistles by his head uncomfortably near. Then comes the click of a lock, the crash as of a falling body, and the sound of hurrying footsteps.

Though suddenly aroused from the reverie into which he had fallen, Curt Dash is instantly himself; and snatching his ever ready rifle from its wonted position, he dashes into the timber, regardless of the consequence. As he passes the outer line of the growth, a man leaps from the shrubbery that overhangs the river, and with a wild triumphant shout rushes for an object a short distance above, brandishing over his head the gleaming blade of a huge bowie. But, suddenly, he hears the rapid approach of the Regulator, and like one frustrated in his designs at the moment of success, he turns upon his intruder with an angry imprecation, to find himself confronted by the muzzle of a rifle looking him full in the face. A wild cry of terror escapes his lips, when regardless of the menacing attitude, regardless of the warning words, he turns like a frightened deer and plunges into the thicket, disappearing from view in the twinkling of an eye, though barely escaping the fire of Curt's rifle.

Puzzled at the strange proceedings of the Mexican, for such he evidently was, Burt is undecided how to act, until his attention is attracted by a recumbent form a short distance ahead, which soon rises to the upright position of a man, and comes forward, exclaiming:

"Ey Randel Rock, Cap! ye saved my ha'r! But where'd the cuss go to? I sh'u'd jest like to have one fair draw on him!"

The speaker is a man young in years, fully six feet in height, well formed, as agile as a panther, as strong as a lion, with a sort of reckless, devil-may-care air. Dressed in buckskin, moccasins and all, beautifully beaded, and wearing upon his head the never-to-be parted with sombrero, his jet-black hair falling down his back in long, glistening ringlets, which a school-girl might well envy, with a heavy mustache and goatee of the same hue, clearly-cut, handsome, though sun-bronzed features, showing a daring almost to desperation, and armed to the teeth, so to speak, with a brace of heavy revolvers and a huge bowie in his belt and a double-barreled rifle now in his hands, he presents a wild, brigandish-looking appearance. But all this is in reality only mere show, as far as it concerns his character, for underneath this dashing exterior beats as true a heart as Texas ever knew. He is known—we say known because really he has no parental name, as he was picked up by an old mountaineer and guide, when but a child, on the great Texan plain near "Randel Rock," and from this simple fact he is known as Rock, one of those strange waifs so often found in border life.

"Hullo, Rock! that you?" cries Curt, evidently surprised.

"Wal, I reckon it is, Cap! but, where's that cussed Greaser gone? D'y'e think ye hit 'im?"

"No, Rock, I don't; he is safe I daresay ere this. It would be useless to follow him. But, what is the meaning of all this? I came nearer losing my head from that shot than is pleasant, whoever fired it."

"The deuce!" exclaims Rock; "but it was the carelessness of that sneaking yaller-skin! Ye see, I hev bin out scrimgin' round a little, jest for exercise; an' thinkin' the old woman might be gittin' oneasy, I war steering for home, when all ter wunst up kerslap comes that infernal Greaser with his shooter, an' let her hev right at me! But the cuss warn't worth a Digger squaw for shootin' an' he didn't come

nowhar. Howsimever, it opened my eyes, an' seeing I hed got to strike out fur myself, I ups my old iron ter let it speak, but fur the fust time it broke—it was no go! Jest then I ketched my foot in a vine an' went ter the ground kerkchunk. Guess the greasy varmint would hev wrung a cold deal on me, ef you hedn't come jest es you did. Give us yer paw, old boy!"

"Do you know the object of this assault? Have you ever seen the man before?" asked the Regulator chief, abruptly, as he grasps the other's hand.

"I spects I hev; it am an old quarrel, Cap. Sum yurs ago I got inter a leetle diffikilty in Taos, an' thar war sum tall fightin' done! I made more than one of the dirty Greasers bite the dust! When it war all over up comes a couple of the bloody Spaniards an' swore thet I sh'ud die. They hunted me a leetle, but I throwed 'em off the trail, and s'posed long ago thet they hed given it up. But it seems they hain't, leastways one hain't, an' the fight ain't over yet. Nol he got the best of me ter-day, the sneaking coyote! But we shall meet ag'in, an' then—wal, he or I will go under! Wagh!"

"You can count upon me as your friend in this affair; but, for the sake of that little woman of yours, Rock, don't do anything rash."

"By hookey, Cap! yer touched me in a tender place. For Luella's sake, I will be careful. But, by Randel Rock! I'll not no sneaking Greaser go foolin' round me. Nol it's his own doin's, an' I'll wipe him out or pass in my checks!"

There was no mistaking the speaker's meaning, for Rock Randel is no idle boaster.

"Wal, Cap," he continues, in a far different tone, after a moment's pause, "I am afeer'd the old woman'll git oneasy; let's dig for home."

"Thank you, Rock; but I must return to Burley's. Ha! as I live, here comes Deckers! Now I shall have company. Good-day. Look out that you ain't caught napping again."

With the words, Curt rides out of the timber to meet the horseman coming down from above; and after exchanging salutations, they ride on together for the Prairie Home, leaving Randel to return to his own abode alone.

As this new-comer, who has so suddenly appeared upon the scene, is to act a strange and important part in our narrative, we may devote a few words to him.

The first thought of a stranger upon seeing Curt Dash and Vall Deckers would be that they are brothers. But the second thought would show the absurdity of this, and leave him wondering how and where the likeness had so suddenly disappeared, for upon a close examination that which seemed at first a similarity, proves a contrast.

Like Curt, Vall Deckers is above medium height, with a lithe, compactly-built frame, capable of an almost iron endurance; with glossy-brown hair and heavy, drooping mustache, from beneath which occasionally gleams a set of pearly-white teeth; regular, perfectly-outlined features; dark, glistening eyes, which seem to wield a fascinating power; a fluency of speech, though silent demeanor; a gentlemanly deportment, in spite of the almost sad expression which accompanies his every look and action; decision, calmness of mind, and stoicism of character stamped upon every lineament of his face, making him a person to command respect if not friendship.

His age is evidently less than Curt's—perhaps two and twenty. But no one in Chesterville seems to know aught of his past history, for it has been scarcely six months since he came to the place, a stranger, and unlike the captain, he has made neither friends nor foes; and though he joined the Regulators soon after his arrival, most of his time is spent in wandering over the neighboring country, with his horse and rifle as his sole companions.

After discussing the topics of the day until exhausted, the two ride on toward the Prairie Home, where they both lodge and board, slowly and silently, each seeming busy with his own thoughts. One revolving in his mind

plans for the future, by which he will be able to throw off the evil genius of his destiny, and win his heart's choice; while the other—well, silence seems his nature, though from the nervous twitching of his mouth, and the tigerish gleam of his eye, thoughts of more than common moment must be surging through his brain.

The Regulators soon come out upon the main path leading from the river to their destination; and the lengthening shadows of the trees proclaim that the day is fast waning. They are in the act of quickening the pace of their horses, when the heavy, regular thud of the hoof-strokes of a horse is heard coming up the beaten track at a smart canter; but without increasing their speed, the two continue on their course, expecting to be speedily overtaken by the approaching horseman, if such it shall prove to be.

Nearer and nearer, but more confused, comes the sound of the hoof-strokes, until it seems almost upon them; and expecting to see a horse and rider full in sight, our friends turn in their saddles, when, to their surprise and astonishment, not a single object is in sight, though they command a view of the path for fully twenty rods. Still they hear the same regular, well-known tread almost upon them, and coming nearer, nearer!

Astonished, perplexed, startled, with amazement plainly written upon every feature, the Regulators watch with anxious looks for an explanation of what seems to be the hoof-strokes of an unseen horse. But not a single living thing is to be seen in the level, hard-beaten path as far as they can see; neither is there anything in the timber that skirts it upon either side; still that familiar tread, now seemingly slackening to a trot, continues to approach nearer, closer, until it seems as if a horse must be in the open space scarcely ten feet from them, when instinctively, as if fearing to come in contact with they know not what, they rein to one side of the track, and the unseen horse, for it can be naught else, reaches them, and dashes by! As it passes, a wild, unearthly laugh rings out upon the air, rings out with awful suddenness, terrible distinctness, sending the blood curdling through their veins. No wonder Curt Dash, with all his bravery, turns pale as death, and careless, reckless, fearless Vall Deckers trembles from head to foot.

On, on seems to rush the unseen horseman, until, turning an abrupt angle in the path, a few rods ahead, the hoof-strokes suddenly cease. A moment of silence; then, again, breaks upon the air that maniacal laugh, hoarse and scornful, quickly followed by the sharp *spang* of a rifle, the death-cry as of a stricken victim, the heavy thud as of a body falling to the earth, another laugh as terrible as the first, and again the hoof-strokes are heard, until they die away in the distance.

"My God!" cries Curt Dash, the first to recover his self-possession, "what is the meaning of all this? Somebody has been shot!" and he dashes forward to the place from whence that shot and those strange cries had been heard, closely followed by Vall Deckers.

The stillness of death hangs over the place when the Regulators draw rein upon the very spot where they expected to find the body of a murdered man. But, upon examination, not a single thing can be found to account for the startling cries and sounds which apparently gave warning of a deadly combat between man and man.

"I don't believe in omens," exclaims Vall Deckers, as they ride on once more for the Prairie Home, after satisfying themselves that they can in no way solve the mystery; "but, mark my word, Curt Dash, something terrible is going to happen."

Ay, mysterious Regulator, your words may prove more prophetic than you will wish!

CHAPTER V.

AN AWFUL WEDDING.

AGAIN all Chesterville is on the *qui vive*; and not only Chesterville, but the neighboring

sections of the county. Old and young, sad and gay, the rough mountaineer and the prattling child, the staid matron and the coy maiden, the sturdy ranchman and the adventure-loving Regulator, all are alike awake to the keenest interest; all have alike discarded other thoughts to dwell exclusively upon—not the pleasure of a shooting-match, not the excitement of a duel, but the anticipation of a wedding.

Conrad Mansion is all ablaze. In and around it all is life and gayety. Already the musicians are at work, and the merry dance has commenced. Still new guests are continually pouring in; and soon comes the entrance of Bessie Raymun, leaning—not upon the strong arm of the Regulator chief, as we should have expected, but upon that of a tall, gentlemanly-looking young man, with a pale skin, and, if it was not for a slight, silken mustache, of almost effeminate appearance. This we know is Will Manners, the general favorite of Chesterville, who is not known to have a single enemy in all Shelby county. Little would the casual observer dream of the fire slumbering in those mild blue eyes, or of the iron nerve and determined will concealed beneath that slender, almost boyish form.

Close behind the couple who have just passed us comes our dashing Regulator friend Rock Randel, Dandy Rock, who goes even to a wedding armed with a brace of revolvers and a huge bowie. By his side is a dark-eyed Spanish beauty, evidently, his "better half."

Seeing none but strangers following, we turn to look for the happy couple whose union this merry crowd has collected to celebrate.

There is an old saying to the effect that all brides are charming. We are not prepared to prove this assertion, but know that in this case it is true. In her bridal robe of spotless white, relieving to good advantage her fair, pure, blonde complexion, with graceful sylph-like form and free, ingenuous manner, Rose Conrad is indeed a charming bride.

But, who and where is the fortunate man who is to bear off this prize? Is it Mark Waring now conversing with her? No. They say it is a stranger, the bold, handsome, rollicking Captain Ned Kelley. If so, where is he? Ah! that is the question which is now puzzling one-half of the guests, which is fast cooling the ardor of the joyous throng, and is keeping the anxious bride and her friends in fearful suspense, for, though the hour for his arrival has long since passed, the bridegroom has not yet come. Surely, it must be something of more than common importance to keep a bride like this waiting.

Hark! Outside upon the graveled walk are heard the quick, ringing footsteps of a man rapidly approaching. The merry dancers pause, and every eye in the room is watching the door, hoping, expecting to see the captain enter. But, as the owner of the footsteps comes through the entrance, a look of surprise and disappointment takes the place of jovous anticipation; the dance is resumed, and the suspense continues, for it is only Vall Deckers.

Unconscious of the disappointment his entrance so innocently caused, Vall wanders through the room in an apparently listless manner, though really his eagle eyes are taking in every object as he passes, until suddenly they rest upon Curt Dash enjoying a *tete-a-tete* with Bessie Raymun, when a dark frown sweeps over his features, and with a half-muttered malediction upon his lips, he turns and strides out of the house—out into the open air—leaps upon the back of his powerful, fleet-footed horse, and rides away for the Red Lands, his form soon disappearing from view. Another half hour and the time for which the wedding was appointed has almost come. Still the bridegroom is absent; and fearing that something—they know not what—has befallen him, men have been dispatched in different directions to see if anything can be learned of his whereabouts, or the cause of his non-appearance, while the bride has retired to her room with a few chosen friends to await their return, which is momentarily expected.

The old-fashioned time-piece standing in the

corner of the room has given its warning note of the approaching hour; the music has ceased, the dancing has stopped, and a death-like stillness has fallen upon the wondering crowd; broken at length by the sudden arrival of the messengers, who, breathless and excited, are reporting to the eager, anxious listeners in an almost incoherent tone the startling intelligence that Captain Kelley was last seen upon his way to the wedding, when the old clock suddenly commences in a slow, measured and, seemingly, mournful accent to dole forth the hour.

As the echo of the last chime dies away, a hoarse, mocking laugh, seeming to come from above and filling the room with its awful intonations, breaks upon the death-like stillness with startling suddenness, with fearful vividness, like the knell of doom. A moment, and the quick, sharp *spang* of a rifle follows from the same direction, plainly heard by every ear; then a sharp, piercing cry of pain, another laugh, and a hushed silence rivaling death falls upon the amazed and awe-stricken assembly.

For a moment the oppressive stillness holds the occupants of the room spell-bound, men, women and children staring at each other in blank astonishment, almost terror, when again they are startled from their stupor, now by a clear, sharp, ringing voice exclaiming:

"Will Manners is wanted at the door!"

Dreaming not of danger, only thinking some one desires his presence, the Regulator pushes his way forward through the crowd, and pauses midway in the door. Then, the anxious, excited, surging mass impatiently waiting for what is to follow, hears the dull thud of the hoof-strokes of an unshod horse upon the graveled walk without, a hoarse, unearthly laugh, the sharp, ringing report of a rifle, a quick, gasping death-cry, the crash of a body falling to the floor, another blood-curdling laugh, the continuance of the hoof-strokes, and—wildest confusion imaginable reigns.

"My God!" cries old Gil Rey, after pushing himself through the excited crowd, and kneeling by the side of a prostrate form, *"Will Manners is shot!"*

CHAPTER VI.

BESSIE RAYMUN'S BRAVERY.

It would be but a failure to attempt to portray the wild confusion, the awful, terrified amazement following the old mountaineer's startling affirmation. Women shrieked, and men rushed blindly to and fro; some purposeless, others vainly trying to push their way through the mass that blocked the doorway, filling the room with their loud, bitter imprecations, lending additional terror to the frightful scene, till the clear, deep-toned voice of Curt Dash breaks upon the strangely-confused babel of sounds, commanding silence; and then, during the hushed stillness that follows, the Regulator chief in a few hurried words gives out his orders, when he and a dozen of his followers rush out of the crowded dwelling out to search for the assassin, and bring him to justice, a part of the crowd joining in the chase, leaving the others to attend to the wants of their friends.

Quickly mounting their horses, the Regulators, vowing vengeance upon the murderer of their comrade, were soon scouring the country in every direction, sparing neither chaparral, nor timber, nor plain, nor river, nor any known place of refuge, in their wild search for human prey, the pale light of the moon now bearing the zenith of the heavens guiding them in their work, and adding a weird aspect to their phantom-like forms gliding from place to place. But, though speedily joined in their efforts by others, and though the search was unremitting and thorough, nothing could be found of their foe, not a single trace of him could be found, not even the hoof-prints of his horse where he must have passed when doing that tragic deed.

In the midst of this fruitless hunt, a startling discovery was made, a discovery which

seemed the key to the mystery of the wedding and which instantly changed their course of action.

The outlaws of the Red Lands had been on a raid!

While the people were at the wedding their homes had been entered and much of their property plundered by these freebooters, who, unmolested, had come and gone, leaving behind the direful evidence of their devilish work, and accounting for the disappearance of Captain Kelley and the shooting of Will Manners.

Loud and deep were the threats of the Regulators and others against the depredators; dark and foreboding were their faces as they learned of the depredation of their hated enemies. However, little time was spent in idle talk. Some hastened to their homes, others returned to the Conrad Mansion, and still others continued the search for some clue to solve the mystery of the night's proceedings, and, perhaps, to find trace of the missing Regulator, Captain Kelley.

Foremost among those who had joined the Regulators in their operations against the slayer of Will Manners, was the impetuous, duty-loving Col. Raymun, too much of a soldier to be idle in a time like this. Thus he was among the first to learn of the raid of the outlaws; and knowing that his own property had been in danger, he felt it his duty to hasten home at once; when, requesting Curt Dash to return to Conrad's for his daughter, which was readily assented to by the chief, he turned homeward, with fearful forebodings in his heart, as trying to prepare himself for the worst.

Leaving the colonel to return to his home, to find his worst fears realized; his property plundered, and his faithful peons in wild commotion over the death of two of their number, slain by the outlaws, we will follow Curt Dash back to Conrad Mansion.

After parting from the colonel, Curt, leaving the others to follow their own option, but knowing that it was useless to continue the search longer, turned back for the place of the intended wedding; however, he had not gone far before the sound of a rapidly approaching horseman caused him to halt; the next instant a man came dashing wildly through the timber, and, without seeming to notice him, would have passed within a few rods of the captain, if he had not ordered, in a clear, commanding tone:

"Hold! Be you friend or foe, stand!"

In answer to the command, the horseman suddenly drew rein; and then, trembling like an aspen, with a wild, scared look upon his face, Rock Randel rode forward to where Curt had halted upon the edge of the prairie that skirted the growth, exclaiming, in a startling voice:

"My God, cap'en! I've seen a spook!"

"A what?" cried Curt, incredulously surprised and amused at the other's strange, incomprehensible demeanor.

"A spook, cap'en! A real live ghost!"

"Oh, nonsense, Rock! You are joking. Come, own up, and say that I scared you."

"I tell yer, Cap'en Dash," answered the other, solemnly, in strange contrast to his usually reckless air, "that it am no joke. I did see a spook, or a speerit, or whatever you may call it, as true as I war named fur Randel Rock."

"Well, Rock, since you will persist in it, tell me how the thing looked. I am getting interested."

"Yer may poke fun at me as much as yer please, cap'en, but I tell yer I'm in dead earnest."

"I don't doubt that, Rock; but tell me how it looked."

"Yer remember the stranger yer killed in ther duel, Curt—an' yer warn't to blame fur it; wal, this war jest the picter uv him, only ten times more so. Thar war them same eyes, that same mustache, that same awful scar, an' every thing jest as they war thet day only ten times worse. He rode the same roan horse,

and, if you would believe me, it had no bridle on, but war the same as when it cleared old Gil Rey. Oh, by heavens, cap'en! it makes my blood bile to jest think uv it!"

"Pshaw, Rock Randel!" cried Curt, impatiently; "you are either crazy or half frightened out of your wits."

"Hold, Curt Dash!" no man ever called me a coward! I fear man nor beast in flesh and blood. Afore I dreamed it war ennythin' but mortal, I ordered him to stop, an' seein' he didn't, I up with my old iron an' let him hev. But, with an awful laugh, the man, or devil, or whatever he was, kept right straight on, and"—here the speaker lowered his voice to almost a whisper—"my bullet went clean through him an' come out upon the other side!"

It was evident that the strange Regulator's superstitious fears were fully aroused, making him seem more like a child than a bold, intrepid man.

"My God!" he cried, an instant later, "there it comes!"

Out from the timber above them flashed a horseman. Over the grass-covered prairie he seemed to fly away to the northward. One moment he was visible, the next he was gone.

Curt Dash had hurriedly raised his rifle, but there was no time for a shot.

"Let him go, Rock; it may not have been your phantom, after all. If what you have said is true, which I do not doubt to a certain extent, we shall probably know more of it hereafter. Come, let's go on to Conrad's."

"Thank yer, cap'en, but I'm goin' t'other way. I am goin' home to run a silver bullet to plunk that spook with, ef I ever see him ag'in. Wag!"

"Well, Rock, don't waste any ammunition on your own shadow," said the other, with a laugh, as he rode away.

Evidently, the Regulator chief was inclined to make light of his companion's startling experience.

Curt found the wedding guests nearly all gone to their respective homes, and Miss Raymun impatiently waiting for the return of her father; thus, his explanation and proffered services were eagerly accepted, when a few moments later, they, too, were among the departing visitors.

Engaged in talking over the stirring and sad events of the night, the couple rode away from the ill-starred place, taking the main path that led from one residence to the other, and before they were hardly aware of it, were approaching the grove in front of their destination, the home of the Regulator's fair companion.

Curt was telling of his meeting with Rock Randel, when, suddenly, out from the thicket that bordered the path, sprung a couple of armed men, seizing the bridles of their horses with such violence as to nearly unseat them.

"Surrender, or die!" thundered the foremost, from beneath the dark covering that shrouded his face, telling instantly that he was Brad Wayne, the masked outlaw, so much dreaded.

Quick as lightning, Curt Dash snatched a revolver from his belt, and leveled it full in the face of his assailant. But, almost the same instant there came the quick whirl of a blow; and with a low cry, the Regulator chief fell back upon his horse and slipped to the earth, senseless.

"Come, Bill!" cried the masked leader, who held the bridle of the other horse, "we must be off with the girl at once."

As the outlaw spoke, he stepped forward to seize his intended captive, when instantly a tiny revolver flashed in the moonlight, right in the masked man's face, and a clear voice, with womanly sharpness in it, rung out upon the still night air:

"Stand! both of you, or I'll fire!"

CHAPTER VII.

A BRAVE ACT AND A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

"Death and fury!" gasped the baffled outlaw: "foiled by a woman!"

Then a slight noise broke upon the stillness of the night.

This was quickly followed by a whirring, whizzing sound, and a lasso, thrown by a skillful hand, coiled down around her shoulders; the noose tightened, pinioning her arms to her side with a vise-like grip, and Bessie Raymun was a helpless prisoner.

"How now, my beautiful tigress?" cried the masked outlaw, exultantly, seizing the lasso, when a third man came up from the rear, leading by the bridle a coal-black horse.

"Back, cowardly dogs!" cried Bessie, with flashing eyes, as if her words could keep the desperadoes at bay.

"No time for fooling!" growled the outlaw, as he rudely seized her; when, with all her power, she gave a sharp, piercing cry for help, that rung out upon the still air with startling distinctness.

"Curse you!" cried her masked captor, "another cry like that and I'll shoot you as I would a dog!"

His companion, evidently thinking he had a troublesome captive, stepped forward to his aid, when accidentally dropping the rein to the bridle of Curt's horse, the animal wheeled and galloped madly away.

"Devils!" exclaimed the outlaw leader, as he secured his captive's hands, after first appropriating her revolver to his own use, "we shall have all Shelby down upon us!"

The next instant he sprung upon the back of his midnight steed; and the others placing the captive behind him, with the injunction to keep her position upon the peril of her life, he plowed the spurs into the sides of his horse, and dashed out of the grove upon the plain, heading away for the Red Lands, leaving his companions to shift for themselves.

As the wild cry for help from Bessie Raymun rung out far and wide upon the stillness of the night, a horseman coming down from above paused by the edge of the chaparral upon Chester plain. He had heard the startling cry, and was waiting for its repetition, or something to explain its cause.

The man was none other than Mark Waring, mounted upon his fleet, dark-brown mare.

Thinking he must have been mistaken, Mark was about to move on, when suddenly his eagle eyes caught sight of a horseman riding out of the *acacia* growth upon the prairie ahead. The pale light of the moon was sufficient for him to see that the horse bore a double burden, and that the second person was a woman.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, "I could swear that that is the masked outlaw upon his black horse; and the other one is Bessie Raymun! My God! there is some deviltry afloat, or I'm no judge."

For a few moments, Mark watched the outlaw and his captive as they rode out upon the plain, steering in a westerly direction though nearing the chaparral; but he seemed uneasy, glancing first up and down the prairie, and then toward the fast approaching horseman, until suddenly he broke forth:

"By heavens! 'tis my only chance! I can but fail! I will do it! Now or never!"

With Mark Waring, to think was to act; and as he gave utterance to the words, he patted the neck of his spirited mare, when touching her lightly with the spur he shot swiftly out from the shadow of the chaparral, the long grass of the plain muffling the hoof-strokes of his faithful animal.

On, on, over the grass-covered prairie, swift almost as the lightning's flash, noiseless as the swoop of an eagle, seemed to fly the reckless Regulator, nearer, nearer, to the fleeing outlaw, whom he was approaching in a diagonal direction.

His attention divided between his captive and his wearied horse, expecting danger only from the rear, the outlaw kept straight upon his course, noticing not the dark form that so suddenly left the chaparral, thus unconscious of the silent yet swift approach of the Regulator, until the latter was almost upon him, and a collision seemed inevitable. Then, too

late to turn aside, he could but keep on, hoping to escape by the fleetness of his horse.

Erect and firm in his saddle, with a calm, fearless determination, having full confidence in himself and steed for the hazardous task, Mark rushed down upon the outlaw with lightning speed, so near that his leg brushed the other's as he dashed by; and in that single instant—that flash of a moment—his strong arm encircled the waist of the captive, and she was lifted from the back of the bandit's horse upon the withers of his own as if she had been but a child, while on, on rode the daring Regulator without even slackening his speed.

Quick as possible the masked outlaw reins in his horse, and wheels about, not expecting to retrieve what he has lost, but more from curiosity. Only for a moment, however, does he pause; only for a moment does he watch the fast retreating Regulator; the sight of another horseman coming out of the *motte* of timber below the chaparral seems to warn him of impending danger, and again he is riding for the Red Lands; though looking back a moment later he sees that that new-comer whether friend or foe has suddenly disappeared.

Mark Waring was no less startled by the sudden appearance of the horseman than the outlaw, though from a different cause. His first warning of the other's approach was a hoarse, sardonic laugh; and then he saw shoot by him, within two rods, distance, outlined in the pale, somber moonlight with awe-striking distinctness, the form of a wild-looking man, mounted upon a dark, powerful horse, whose head, as he plainly saw, was free from bit or bridle.

There was that in the horseman which caused the mind of the Regulator to go back to that mysterious unknown who had fallen in the duel with Curt Dash, and whom he himself had helped to bury by the edge of Chester chaparral; the horse, too, seemed the same bridleless roan that broke from the grasp of old Gil Rey.

A moment later Mark rode into the grove, and was soon met by Curt Dash, who had recovered from the effects of the outlaw's blow, and half a dozen others, summoned thither by Bessie's cry—among them her father.

A few words served to explain all, when Mark was heartily thanked by the colonel and his daughter for the service he had rendered, and commended for his gallant act by the others.

"Tut, tut, friends!" exclaimed the sturdy Regulator, firmly, blushing like a school-girl beneath the steady fire of praise, "I ask no thanks for doing what I deemed my duty; and as my services are no longer needed, I must bid you 'good-night.'"

The next instant he was riding toward Conrad Mansion at a smart canter.

"A strange, but noble, true-hearted man, said the colonel, as Mark rode away.

"All of that," assented the Regulator chief, though the words were spoken in a tone which seemed to imply that he but half believed them. But, colonel, Miss Raymun, I, too, must bid you 'good-night,' and hasten back to the Prairie Home, where I think I am more needed, as something must be done immediately to ferret out these outlaws, and punish them for this night's work."

Leaving Colonel Raymun and Bessie to seek the rest they so much need after the stirring events through which they have just passed, Curt Dash to return to the Prairie Home, and Mark Waring to follow the bent of his own inclination, we will go back to record one other incident of startling importance before we close this chapter.

None were more active that eventful night than the old mountaineer, Gil Rey, who, ably seconded by another of his own stamp—a boon companion—the well-known Truman Williams, familiarly called by the abbreviated name True Bill, continued the search long after it had been abandoned by others. But at last they were fain to acknowledge themselves "beaten," and turned back for Burley's. When nearing the chaparral, the horse of Gil Rey, who was a little in advance, frightened at an object in the

path ahead, sprung to one side, nearly upsetting its rider.

"For God's sake, Bill! what's that?" cried Gil Rey, reining in his rearing animal.

"Good Heaven, Gil! it's Captain Ned, or I'm a living liar!" answered the other, as he leaped from the back of his horse, and approached the object.

Sure enough, cold and stark in death, lay before them the body of Captain Kelley!

CHAPTER VIII.

DANDY ROCK MEETS HIS FOE.

ALL Chesterville seemed ready and determined to take arms against the outlaws. Few were there who had not suffered by their depredation. Many had lost heavily. But it was not for plundered property they cared so much. This, though it would have ordinarily excited them to action, was now almost forgotten. The fate of Captain Kelley and Will Manners was uppermost in every mind. Many and fierce were the threats offered against the outlawed band. Some of the most impulsive were for every man in the settlement to shoulder his gun, all to proceed in a body to the "Red Lands," ferret out the banditti, and exterminate the whole gang at one swoop.

The plan met with a stern rebuke from the Regulator chief. It would leave their homes entirely unprotected; and while they were searching for the outlaws, the latter might wreak a terrible work. Then, again, they knew not even the direction in which their foes were located.

It was soon proposed and accepted, as the most feasible plan, that before any decided movement should be taken, some of the best scouts in the place should proceed to the Red Lands and institute a careful and thorough reconnaissance for the rendezvous of the robbers. If successful, then active movements would be taken to rid Shelby county of its dreaded foes.

Half a dozen Regulators were quickly selected for the hazardous enterprise. Others would have willingly joined, but this was deemed a sufficient number. And it was decided that they should not proceed in a body, but separate, and act singly, or, perhaps, in pairs. However, it was considered best to keep together until near their destination, when they could act as circumstances would seem to warrant. Thus, without delay, the hardy scouts mounted their horses, and, with the good wishes of the others for their success, were soon riding out of the bottom timber to the west of the Prairie Home, heading across the plain, hoping to reach the Red Lands before the rising of the morrow's sun. Those left behind repaired to their homes, and the night for Chesterville which had commenced so propitiously, been so fearfully eventful, ended with the calm that invariably follows the storm.

The first rays of the rising sun were tinging the eastern horizon with a crimson light as the Regulators drew rein under the lofty branches of a huge sycamore, the largest tree to be found in all that broken waste, its towering form, for years stricken with decay, rising far above the stunted growth that surrounded it, making it a conspicuous mark for the traveler, and gaining for itself the name of the "Prairie Sentinel," by which it was distinguished throughout Shelby. This stood but a short distance from that wild, rock-bound ravine known as the "Black Gulch."

As yet no indications of their enemies had been found; but the time for work had come. In a few words the leader, none other than the Regulator chief himself, unfolded his plans.

Curt, accompanied by Gil Rey, was to take a westerly course, following on as far as they should deem proper. Two of the others—one the well-known Texan borderer, Mexican Pete, who was familiar with every inch of the Southwestern frontier, and Long Gus Durrel, a tall, gaunt, hawk-eyed Yankee, who, as guide, trailer and Indian-fighter, had been the hero of some "tall doin's," and was known to be a

brave man, and efficient scout—was to have a southerly direction. While to our friends, Dandy Rock and Hank Webber, was assigned the territory of the north.

A few parting injunctions from Curt Dash, and they separated, with the understanding that at least one of each twain should meet there at sunset, and report their success. If this should fail, the others might know they were in trouble, and needing help.

Leaving their comrades, Rock and Hank soon entered the "Black Gulch," where they were forced to make a slow and laborious passage; and as they worked through the narrow defile between the two great cliffs, they could not help thinking of the fearful trap they would be in should their foes chance to sweep down upon them then. An ominous silence hung over the place; and when its shadows were left behind, they breathed easier.

Slowly, and often at disadvantage, the Regulators keep upon their course, now pressing through the tangled stunted growth, then across gullies and rocky ravines, past huge boulders and over fallen trees, whose forms, slowly yielding to decay, present a strong contrast to their successors covering the wild waste, and finally following a well-worn path, bearing plainly the foot-prints of wild beasts. They knew too well the perils of their situation to relax for one moment their vigilance, and exercised the utmost caution, feeling that at any moment they might meet members of the outlaw brotherhood, though as yet they seemed alone in the wilderness.

The sun was past the meridian when the scouts suddenly came upon an opening in the forest, which proved to be the valley of the Rio Burte. Here were water and pasturing for their horses, both of which they needed; so, quickly dismounting, and allowing their animals to eat and drink at their leisure, they were about to withdraw into the shade for an hour's rest, when the quick eye of Rock caught sight of a fresh hoof-print near the margin of the river. It had not been made by one of their horses; some one else must have been in the valley before them. A hasty examination, and they knew that a horse had crossed the river at this point. Doubtless it bore a rider; if so, probably an outlaw. Here was a clue, and they must follow it up.

Knowing their horses would not stray far, the regulators quickly crossed the stream, and finding the hoof-prints on the other side as they had expected, they found no difficulty in following the trail, which soon entered the growth.

For a mile, perhaps, the Regulators followed on without trouble or any new discovery; then they were surprised to find that though they had been following the trail made by the hoof-prints of a single horse, there were now two sets, one branching to the right, and the other to the left. Puzzled by this, they made a thorough examination, but could not solve the mystery. The tracks were all made by one animal—the two trails seeming to have grown out of one!

"Wal, Rock," exclaimed Hank, "this beats me; but you take the left and this coon'll take the right, and p'raps we'll git even with it yet."

Thus they separated.

Rock followed his for a while without difficulty; then suddenly it ended. Baffled for a time, he still kept on, till at last he found the trail again.

Half an hour later Rock suddenly stopped, with an ejaculation of surprise. He had found the footprints of a man upon the trail. They had been made within an hour, too. He saw at a glance they were too small for Hank's. Whose were they then? Cautiously, the wary scout advanced, half expecting to see the burly form of an outlaw rise in his path at every step. Then again he paused. There seemed something familiar in the footprints, and another exclamation escaped his lips, when a moment later he discovered that *they were his own*, and that in following the trail he had been going round in a circle!

The now thoroughly puzzled Regulator was

half inclined to turn back; but something seemed to prompt him on, and paying no more regard to the trail, he cautiously yet rapidly advanced through the growth, heeding not the direction he took, only seeming anxious to press on.

Rock had considered himself familiar with nearly every inch of the Red Lands, but he soon found that he was coming into a district where he had never been. The country was growing wilder and more broken. Soon he heard the roaring of water, as of a river dashing over a precipice. Could it be the sluggish Rio Burte? He soon found that he was approaching more elevated ground; and five minutes later had ascended a large ridge or sort of plateau, covered here and there with patches of dwarf oak. He could still hear the roaring of water, plainer than ever, but now it seemed below him. Ahead was a cliff nearly twenty feet in height, sloping back to the west until it came on a level with the plateau, while its east side was perpendicular. A short distance to the right and he came upon the bank of a chasm, where twenty feet below, the waters of the Rio Burte were dashed furiously over piles of loose stones and huge boulders in continual rapids, till the river was a mad, roaring, foaming cataract.

Following along on the brink of the precipice, Rock soon reached the base of the cliff, to discover what seemed a sort of footpath leading to the edge of the abyss, where of course it came to an abrupt termination. But down where the cliff connected with the nearly perpendicular bank of the river was a sort of shelf or projection of the regular ledge, which was well designed for a natural pass-way, though this, like the other, apparently came to a sudden end by an abrupt angle of the cliff. Did the two have any connection?

Rock Randel was not one to speculate. With him to think was to act; and though the jutting out of the rock promised but mere foothold upon the side of the massive cliff, with no chance for a hand-hold above, and twenty feet certain destruction below, he resolved to hazard the attempt of scaling the narrow rim, to know if there was aught beyond its sudden turn.

Slowly and carefully the Regulator worked his way along the dangerous pathway. A stone loosed from its place by his foot went crashing down the precipitous side into the madly rushing river, with an angry splash, which sent a shudder through his frame as he thought of what would be his fate should he miss his footing. But, the angle was safely reached, when he saw that his labor had been in vain. The rude passage continued on a short distance, then abruptly widened out into a sort of platform, to be met beyond by the solid ledge. Rock was about to turn back, when a noise from the cliff above caught his attention; and looking up, he saw standing upon its very brink a dozen armed men, their rifles pointed directly at his person.

Cosplay! Move a hand or foot and we'll riddle you with bullets!"

CHAPTER IX.

"ROCK RANDEL WILL DIE GAME."

"MOVE a hand or foot and we'll riddle you with bullets!"

For one moment the Regulator was as motionless as a statue. A single glance was sufficient to tell him the peril of his situation. The speaker was his most dreaded enemy, the Mexican avenger, and he was completely in his power; but Dandy Rock was not one to be easily frightened, and he resolved to make the best of his situation.

"Wal, old yaller-skin, what 'll yer hev? Spit it out mighty suddint, fur I don't like this posish at all!"

With an oath, the Mexican exclaimed:

"Lay down your arms."

"S'posen I don't, what then, Greaser?" asked the imperturbable Regulator.

"*Caramba!*" ejaculated the other fiercely, "I'll not fool with you! Lay down your arms, dog, or you shall die!"

A less impetuous person would have quietly submitted to the inevitable, and become the prisoner of the Mexican and his horde. But, not so with Rock Randel; he knew too well what captivity meant. Better would it be for him to hurl himself into the rocky canon of the Rio Burte, than yield to his revengeful foe, the outlawed desperado, San Mullre.

"No, old boss! you're mighty important! Say, hain't ye goin' ter give a feller no kind uv a show? Jess p'int them ar' shooters t'other way, please."

"Fool!" exclaimed the Mexican, "will you surrender without resistance, or die like a dog?"

"Never!" cried the other defiantly; "when Rock Randel sells out to a sneaking Greaser, thar's got to be blood spilt! Take that, dog of a yaller-skin!" and forgetting his precarious footing, unminful of the dozen ominous muzzles pointed at his breast, caring for naught else but his determination to fight to the bitter end, the reckless Regulator brought his own rifle to shoulder, and before the horde upon the cliff realized his intentions, a sharp ringing report broke upon the air, and a bullet just grazed San Mullre's temple.

A wild yell, and a dozen bullets cleft the ledge where the daring Regulator had stood; but he had sprung forward in season to escape the volley which he knew would follow his shot. Then he turned as if to spring into the mad river. But at that moment, a lasso thrown by a dextrous hand came whirling through the air, and the roose settled down around his shoulders, pinioning his arms to his side.

A shout of triumph went up from the Mexican's band, as Rock felt the cord straightening; and crouching back against the cliff for an instant, the Regulator then sprang forward upon the rock platform. The Mexican lassoer, leaning slightly over the cliff to note his success, suddenly felt himself snatched forward, and powerless to save himself, was hurled through the air to fall at Randel's feet a lifeless body.

Quick as a flash Rock threw off the lasso, and seized the burly form of the dead Mexican, when backing up against the rock, he held it before him as a shield, with his left hand, while with the other, he drew and cocked one of his heavy revolvers; and holding it in a menacing manner, he cried, tauntingly:

"Bang away, my coyotes! Rock Randel dies game!"

The Mexican and his followers were baffled, for at least a time. It was true they had an almost unlimited advantage, and it seemed certain that the Regulator must sooner or later fall into their power. But they knew the first man who should make a move would sign his death-warrant, and no one in all that gang felt like facing death, thus they stood like men transfixed.

Five minutes, that seemed like so many hours, wore away, and not a word had been spoken, not a move had been made. The men upon the cliff were standing there like blocks of adamant, knowing that to move was to die. The Regulator, too, was motionless, held in his position by the same power. But he was getting the worst of it. Already his left arm seemed paralyzed. He felt that the crisis was near at hand, and he could not help wondering how it would all end. Intuitively, his mind went back to his pleasant home, and the fond one anxiously waiting for his return; and then, he thought of his Regulator companion, and hoped, prayed that he might come to his—

Like a flash, a man seemed to drop by his side. So sudden, so unexpected, that Rock uttered an involuntary cry, and dropped the body of the dead Mexican. Then he felt himself seized in a grasp of iron, and saw the blade of a knife glisten in the air. Instinctively he grappled with his unknown assailant.

Back and forth, to and fro, the combatants struggled, each trying in vain to gain the mastery, so evenly were they matched. Rock had been taken at a great disadvantage, and for a moment it had seemed as if he must suc-

cumb. He had not been quick enough to use his revolver before it was knocked from his grasp; and the other had miscalculated with his knife. Thus like two tigers they fought, each knowing that life was at stake.

Slowly but surely Rock at last felt his strength leaving him. The other had seized him by the throat in a vise-like gripe; his eyes seemed starting from their sockets; he could not breathe; he was strangling to death!

Rock Randel felt that his time had come; but with the desperate energy of a dying man, he tried again to free himself from that fearful grasp; and by an almost superhuman effort, he succeeded in pressing back his antagonist. Then he saw what sent a thrill of hope through his frame, and added ten-fold power to his fast failing strength. *The other was standing upon the very edge of the rock overhanging the canon.* With a mighty effort the Regulator rallied. Fortune favored him. He pushed his assailant back, back over the fearful chasm, till the latter finding he was losing his equilibrium, loosened his hold upon the other, and throwing up his arms, clutched wildly at the empty air for support. In vain. Too late to regain what he had lost. With a wild, startling cry, he went down—down upon the rocks below, where the furious stream caught his body and swept it on with its rapid tide.

Weak and faint, Rock staggered back against the ledge. Then his half dimmed vision saw the forms of his foes rise before him. They had rushed to the rescue of their comrade, and reached the spot only one moment too late to save him from a fearful doom.

With wild, revengeful cries, they rushed upon the Regulator, who rallying for an instant, drew his other revolver, and with a defiant shout, emptied chamber after chamber into their midst. Though firing half at random, he saw at least two of them fall; then his brain reeled; he felt himself overpowered and borne down, a helpless prisoner.

When Rock returned to consciousness, he found his hands securely bound behind him; and without delay he was forced to make the perilous journey around the cliff, with one of his own revolvers pointed at his temple by the nervous hand of San Mullre.

At last the plateau was reached, and Rock saw that his captors, whom he judged to be a portion of the outlaw band, now consisted of half a dozen harsh, brutal-looking ruffians. As yet not a word had been spoken, save a few coarse oaths, but he knew well there was no hope for mercy. Still the Regulator was not one to mourn over misfortunes, and, as he was wont to say, was "bound to die game."

"Say, pard, I 'low you've rung a cold deal on me this time; but, by Randel Rock, where'd thet feller come from thet kem so near whoppin' me? Jess tell me thet, old yaller-hide, an' I'll feel a heap easier."

"*Cospital*, you'd better ask what fate has in store."

"Gehosophat! What do I care about fate? But, didn't I jess sling over four of yours, slick! By Columby! jess undo my hands and give me back my old shooters and I'll bu'st the hull caboodle uv ye!"

An angry scowl flitted across the bleared visage of the Mexican, and his followers clutched their weapons. It was plain that the reckless Regulator was trifling with dangerous men.

"Dog! another word and I'll brain you where you stand."

"Sho! then mum's the word, is it? Wal, here goes."

At this juncture some one was heard coming through the growth; a couple of new-comers appeared upon the scene; and to the surprise of Rock one of them was leading by the bridle *his own horse*. What did this mean? Surely, Hank was in trouble; and the conviction forced itself upon him that his friend had fallen into the outlaws' hands. If so, his last spark of hope was gone.

As the new arrivals joined their companions, a consultation was held; and during the interview, though Rock could not hear their speech, he felt certain they were discussing his fate,

and by their fierce gesticulations and angry manner he knew his doom was sealed.

"Senor will do well to say his prayers," said the Mexican, leaving the group, a sickly smile of triumph playing upon his sallow countenance, "for soon he will dangle from yonder tree."

Then in silence Rock was led rudely forward to the designated spot, followed by his captors.

The tree selected seemed peculiarly fitted for the frightful business; and without delay, the outlaws made such preparations as were necessary to carry out their nefarious scheme.

The Regulator's horse was brought forward under a projecting branch, and Dandy was made to stand upon his back. Then a noose was fitted to his neck while the end of the cord was secured to the limb above. His hands were still securely fastened behind him. Every thing was in readiness for the last horrible proceedings which was to launch him into eternity.

How Rock longed for freedom. He cared not so much for himself as for the loved one at home, who would be left without a protector—alone in the world. Still he did not give way to his emotion. He had his part to act, and, outwardly, was as calm and immovable as adamant.

The Mexican, who had watched the preparations with sardonic satisfaction, now approached the Regulator, his evil-looking visage fairly hideous with its fiendish gleam of exultation. After seeming to enjoy the scene for a while, he broke forth in a taunting tone:

"Well, senor, my turn has come. You thought to escape after doing what you did that night—and taking *her* away, too! But you have found that the oath of San Mullre is no idle vow. *Cospital*! I swore over the bodies of my dead comrades—slain by your own hands—that you should die, dog of an American! and die, *die* you shall. I have hunted you long, but triumphed at last. *Caramba!* I intended to have torn you limb from limb; but my messenger tells me I have other work to do. I have not the time now; so I must content myself by seeing you dangle from this tree, food for the buzzards. Oh, if Pedro was only here! What message shall I carry to the senora? Ha! that is good! She shall know how you perished; and when I go back of Taos, she shall go with me—*mine!* And this is San Mullre's vengeance; enjoy it now, for *within one moment you shall swing between heaven and earth!*"

As the Mexican finished speaking, he raised his hand as the signal for the rude execution. The fatal moment had come.

CHAPTER X.

WHO SAVED ROCK RANDEL?

THE crisis came, but not as expected.

Before the outlaws could start the horse under their prisoner, the sharp report of a rifle followed by another, and the thong which suspended the Regulator from the limb of the tree was cut in twain by the bullets from the unseen rifleman.

Confusion followed.

Then a cry, and the sound as of a person rushing through the thicket of the growth to the east was distinctly heard. With one accord the outlaws ran in that direction, save two who staid by the captive.

As the outlaws disappeared in the thicket to the east the report of a rifle again rung out, and again it was followed by a second, when the two men standing guard over their captive fell dead in their tracks, shot through the brain.

So sudden and unexpected was all this, that Rock Randel seemed stupefied. But a quick, sharp voice almost at his side brought him to his senses.

"Ride! for your life, ride!"

In an instant Rock was astride his horse, and the faithful animal, that through all the foregoing scene had stood so quiet, at the well-known voice of his master, bounded forward with all his energy.

As the Regulator reached the growth beyond the clearing of the plateau, he heard loud shouts and curses from the outlaws, mingled with the report of firearms, and half a dozen bullets whistled round his head. But it was random firing, and the only effect it had was to increase his speed.

That was a wild ride. The Regulator's hands were still fastened behind him, the thong was still hanging from his neck, while his long, raven hair streamed in the air, and though he found but little difficulty in guiding his trained horse by voice and knee, the low-limbed forest, the tangled brushwood, the rocky, uneven surface of the earth, forcing him to be continually changing his course, made his headlong flight fearfully perilous. But, afoot, and in a lurch, the baffled outlaws were soon left far behind.

As soon as he felt safe from the pursuit of his foes, Rock, shaping his course for the sentinel sycamore, slackened the pace of his horse to a more leisurely gait.

Half an hour later he was startled by the sound of an approaching horseman coming directly toward him; and fully realizing then for the first time the helplessness of his condition, should it be a foe, he was about to turn his horse one side, knowing his only chance of escape lay in immediate flight, when a familiar voice exclaimed:

"Hold there! That you, Rock Randel?"

"By Randel Rock, Hank, it am! Leastways all there is left uv me."

"By Jove, Rock! I thought ye war gone under sure!"

"Jess undo my paws here, an' take this hyar necklace off, an' p'raps I'll feel more like yarnin' it. Wagh!"

"But where hev ye been to git rigged up like this?" asked Hank, as he cut the ligatures from his companion's hands, and helped remove the thong around his neck.

In reply, Rock narrated to his astonished friend, in his peculiar way, the perilous adventures and hairbreadth escapes through which he had passed.

"It war a narrer squeak, an' no mistake!" ejaculated Hank, as the other finished his strange story.

"But how'd you manage to keep cl'ar uv 'em?" queried Rock.

"Wal, ye see I got fooled on thet trail 'bout same as ye did; so I went back to our hosses, an' commenced ter wait fer you; but the more I waited the more ye didn't come. Purty soon I got onpatient, an' thinkin' ye hed either got lost or gobbled up by the 'outs,' I war goin' to take yer trail an' foller yer, when all ter wunst a dozen of the very same varmints pounced onter me, an' I hed ter up an' take my walkin' papers right quick, ye bet. But, somehow, I managed ter mount my hoss; and es they war afoot, I left 'em. I tried ter lead yer hoss, but he broke away. Howsumever, I wiped out two uv the cusses, an' fetched round hyar. I know'd the varmints war too thick fer me to do ye enny good alone, so I war goin' fer the other boys to 'sist me, though really s'posing you war rubbed out."

"Then it warn't you thet done the shootin' an' told me to scamper so?" asked Rock, in evident surprise.

"No, pard; I warn't 'lowed the priv'lege."

"Who war it then?" exclaimed the first.

"Mus' bin Old Nick," said Hank, solemnly.

"I w'd jess like ter grip his paw, if it war the Old Boy himself. But it warn't; I almost knowed ther voice; an' whoever it war, ef he'll only say the word, he can count on Rock Randel ter lay down his life fer him. I tell yer, Hank, thet war some tall shootin'. The cap'n himself c'd'n't beat it."

"Kerrect, pard."

The day was fast waning, and the Regulators saw that to reach their destination at the appointed time, they had got to hurry on, so the conversation ended; and, save an occasional remark, they continued on their way in silence.

A little before sunset our friends reached the sycamore, where they found Long Gas Durrell

and Mexican Pete, who reported an unsuccessful day's work.

Pretty soon Curt Dash joined the group, but he came alone.

"Where is Gil Rey?" was the question that greeted the Regulator chief as he reached the spot.

"Safe and sound as far as I know," answered Curt; "but he is still on the trail. He is bound not to give it up so easily. The old mountain coon is a long trailer. But what success, boys?"

Then the hardy little band gathered round the old sycamore, and each in turn briefly narrated his day's experience.

It seemed that Mexican Pete and Long Gus had been wholly unsuccessful, as far as the object of their search was concerned. Curt Dash believed that Gil Rey and himself had been in the right direction, though as yet nothing positive had been learned. The Regulator chief also gave it as his opinion that San Mullre and his gang were not in any way connected with the masked outlaw, Black Wayne, and his followers.

The Regulators were in the midst of their consultation, when suddenly a wild, sardonic laugh, prolonged to almost a shriek, broke the stillness of the scene.

"Good God! look there!"

It was Long Gus Durrell who made the startling exclamation.

Every man uttered an involuntary cry at the sight which met their gaze.

Riding forward, as if he had just emerged from the solid cliff that hemmed in the Black Gulch, was a horseman, who, once seen, was never to be forgotten. He was the exact counterpart of One Leg, the mysterious Unknown, who had fallen in that duel with Curt Dash, three weeks before! There is that same form, with its missing leg—the same long, iron-gray hair—those same piercing eyes—that fearful scar—that unnatural mien; and he carries the same dark-stained rifle, rides the same roan steed, guided now without bit or bridle! All this; and who cannot help thinking but it is the phantom of the unnamed duelist, whose maimed body was buried by the edge of Chester chaparral, beneath two feet of Texas earth?

Awe-struck, the Regulators behold the fearful horseman coming nearer and nearer, clutching his rifle nervously.

Curt Dash is the first to recover his self-possession, and with forced calmness, he raises his rifle to his shoulder, exclaiming, in a stern, menacing tone:

"Be you man or devil, stand!"

Without heeding the demand, other than a slight laugh, the form still advances.

"Be the consequences upon your own head!" cries Curt, as, with a certain aim, he fires.

As the others heard the report of their leader's rifle, they expected to see the stranger fall, but to their surprise and consternation, with a scornful laugh the horseman rides on!

Has One Leg, the dead duelist, two lives to live, two deaths to die, before his unquiet spirit is made to sleep?

CHAPTER XI.

ANOTHER.

PARALYZED with terror, the five Texans saw the maimed horseman ride past; then they breathed easier. But, at the very same moment he disappeared in the growth twenty rods to the left, they heard that same scornful laugh right in front of them, quickly followed by the crack of a rifle, and a bullet sped by Curt Dash's head, so near that it left its mark upon his temple.

Stunned, the Regulator chief staggered back against the sycamore.

"My God! the cap'en is killed!" cried Hank Webber, rushing forward to Curt's side.

Mexican Pete, Long Gus and Dandy Rock dashed into the thicket from whence the shot had been fired; but they could find no trace of

the would-be assassin, and after a diligent search were obliged to give it up. No covert could they find that would secrete a single man, much more a horse and rider.

Curt soon recovered from the effect of the shot; but it was some moments before the little group rallied from their fright.

"Wal, by hookey, Cap!" exclaimed Dandy Rock, who was the first to break the silence, "what d'ye think uv my spook now? This war the very same pacter uv what I see'd thet night, an' I knowed thet lead wouldn't hev enny 'pression on him, fer I tried it then. I've a silver bullet fer him; thet 'll fix him; but, cuss thet Greaser, here I am in a fightin' kentry without enny guards. Howsomever, this ain't going ter last long. I'll hev back my old shooters an' wipe out thet coyote, or git throwed. Wagh! Rock Randel don't want a top-knot in this kentry, unless he am 'lowed to guard it!"

"Well, boys!" Curt at last said, "I don't see as we can mend the matter by standing here. There is some mystery in this, but I am inclined to think it is a scare gotten up by some of the boys, or, perhaps, a trick of the outlaws."

"But the shot, cap'en; how do you explain that?" asked Mexican Pete; and then pointing to the sycamore where it had entered, he exclaimed, "it was done with a copper bullet!"

The Regulator was right, and the discovery, recalling vividly to mind the strange and startling assertion of One Leg the Unknown, added terribly to the mystery.

"Boyees!" exclaimed Dandy Rock, solemnly, "I've seen the thing afore, an' I know it ar' the spook uv thet one-legged stranger cap'en rubbed out in thet duel. He don't rest easy; but a silver bullet 'll fix him, now mark my word!"

"Be it a phantom or not, it never 'll do to dally here," replied Curt, who, less superstitious than the others, was not disposed to dwell upon the subject, though he had really faced all the danger. "I am going back to meet Gil Rey. The rest of you can go on to the Prairie Home, if you choose."

"What! yer goin' back ter-night?" exclaimed Long Gus, as if startled by the bare thought.

"Yes," answered the Regulator chief; "I am not going back to the Prairie Home till I find the outlaws' den if it is in the Red Lands."

"Ef yell jess say the word, I'm with ye, cap'en!" said the giant Regulator.

"No, Hank; I shall not need you now. Two in a case like this are better than more. Go back to Chesterville and see if everything is well there. Expect to hear from me soon. Good-by."

Curt Dash, unmindful of the dangers surrounding him, was gone, to continue his perilous work; and the others—well, to speak the truth, after what they had seen, they were glad to head for Chesterville.

On their way back, in following the path that led through the timber west of the chaparral, the Regulators were forced to pass near the grave of the Dead Duelist; and as they neared the fatal spot a superstitious dread seized them. It was getting quite dark, and save the hoof-strokes of their horses, the stillness of death hung over the valley, unbroken till they were opposite the ill-fated burial-place; then came the startling report of a rifle—a report that seemed to issue from the lonely grave! Not a single person or object was in sight, yet all plainly heard the report, with the echo that followed, and thrilled with terror, they galloped madly on.

A crowd had gathered at the Prairie Home—an anxious, excited throng. The arrival of their friends from the Red Lands was hailed with delight, and they were plied with questions.

The stories of the Regulator scouts were listened to with interest, almost awe. Many a curious question was asked, and many an approving comment made. But when mention was given of the Dead Duelist and that fearful scene under the lone sycamore, coupled with the discovery of the copper bullet, hushed still-

ness fell upon the listeners; and as Hank finished the singular narrative it was announced that Captain Kelley and Will Manners had both been shot with copper bullets!

All this might merely be a series of singular coincidences. Perhaps there was nothing startling in the manner of the death of Captain Kelley and Will Manners, nothing strange in the appearance of the Dead Duelist, nothing remarkable in this use of copper bullets, nothing extraordinary or connected in the scenes of the last fortnight; but the minds of the superstitious borderers were stirred to their fullest depths.

"I'll tell ye what it is, boys," said Long Gus, "there is some foul play about this!"

"Wal," chimed in Dandy Rock, "this spook bizness is foul bizness ennyway, I calculate! But I jess want ter see Mister Spirit, or whatever he is, once more arter I git my other shooter plummed with a silver bullet. I'll show him how to be tearing round loose; I will, wagh!"

"Where is Mark Waring?" asked Rock, a few minutes later. But no one knew. In fact he had not been seen since the night before.

"Gone to the Red Lands, mebbe," supplemented True Bill.

"Hain't you got a weepoon—"

Dandy Rock commenced the sentence, but he never finished it. At that moment, loud cries and the hurried tramp of rushing feet were heard without. The next instant the door was thrown violently open, and Clint Trask, the Regulator, with his long hair disheveled and streaming in the air, a wild, scared look upon his face, rushed into the room, shrieking:

"I have seen him! I have seen him! 'Tis he! back from his grave! For God's sake, save me! save me!"

A low, mocking laugh! Outside, the crowd behold the weird form of the Dead Duelist upon his dark-roan steed!

The haggard fugitive hears the laugh. He turns pale as death.

"God have mercy on me! I am lost! lost!"

A moment of awful suspense. Then, the report of a rifle; and with a low cry Clint Trask, the doomed Regulator, throws up his arms, and staggering back, falls to the floor, dead.

An instant later the fearful horseman is gone, and in the wild confusion that follows, no trace of him can be found.

CHAPTER XII.

A PERILOUS SCOUT.

GIL REY had avowed his intentions of continuing the search for the outlaws' retreat. Curt Dash had given his hearty approval.

They separated—the Regulator chief to return to meet their comrades, the mountaineer to proceed on in a south-westerly course.

We know Curt met the others at the sycamore; we are familiar with the scenes that succeeded; so let us follow the fortunes of the veteran scout, Gil Rey.

An hour's ride nearly to the south and our mountaineer had left the Red Lands proper behind. He was now in a country which, though it presented many features similar to the latter, was on the whole a forcible contrast. Instead of an unvaried tract of land, sparsely covered with a stunted growth fast hastening to decay, unrelieved for miles at a time by a single redeeming object, extending for leagues and leagues in one wild waste, here was Nature in her most diversified form. The precipitous bluff, surrounded by the timbered bottom, the level plain, unbroken as far as the vision can extend, the rocky canon, its darksome depths dividing the desert-land from the green prairie, and the fertile valley with its babbling stream of limpid water, were all stretched before the astonished gaze of the scout in one panoramic view.

"Wal!" ejaculated Gil, "this am a change an' no mistake! I'll bet this am jest the kentry whar them ar' varmints ar'—"

A low whinny from his horse interrupted the Regulator's soliloquy, and caused him to look suspiciously round, when he saw a man approaching whom he quickly recognized as his friend, Mark Waring.

The meeting between the Regulators was of mutual pleasure and surprise.

"Wal, Mark," said Gil Rey, in an undertone, as he grasped the other's hand, "I'm right glad to meet ye, fer blame me if I don't believe we ar' in the stampin'-ground o' the outlaws."

"You are right, Gil; *their den is just below here.*"

"What!" exclaimed the other, "yer don't say that yer hev diskivered it?"

"I know pretty near where it is," said Waring, slowly; "and have been waiting all the afternoon for darkness to come, so I could reconnoiter. From my retreat, I saw your approach, and so came out to meet you. But it is not safe for us to tarry here, as the outlaws are liable to discover us at any moment. Come with me to my hiding-place."

Mark led the way across the valley to the foot of the bluff, when, pushing their course through a line of thick, tangled growth that skirted the bank of a small stream, they suddenly entered a clearing or glade, completely hidden from the outer world. Here was his horse, nibbling with a hearty will the green grass which reached to his knees.

"Tether your horse here with mine," said Waring; "and as we have a hard night's work before us, we need something to eat, so come up to the cliff, where I have got a bit that will do for both of us, I guess."

Soon the sun sunk from sight, and night once more shrouded the western world.

"Well, Gil," said Mark, at last, "our time has come. We must be moving before the moon goes down."

Mark Waring, having thus suddenly come forward as an important actor in our border-life drama, we crave the reader's indulgence, to present, at this late hour, an outline of his appearance and bearing, that he and his destiny may be better understood; for, had it not been for him, Chesterville would have had a different history, and our narrative would never have been told.

Possessing a lithe, compactly-built frame, with broad shoulders and deep, full chest, Mark Waring's six feet of manhood was a noble, majestic form. His dark-brown hair, with a full set of whiskers and mustache a shade lighter; dark eyes, regular features and pure complexion, gave him a "good-looking" visage, upon which twenty-seven years of border life had scarcely left an imprint. He was well known in Shelby county, having been in Chesterville two years, as an experienced hunter and scout, and a brave, true-hearted man. From whence he came and who he was, of course none knew or cared. With Curt Dash he had been one of the originators of the band of Rangers and Regulators. He was not known to have any relatives in Chesterville, and was unmarried, being, as he had often said, with an almost saddened tone, "alone in the world."

Leaving their horses secured in a snug retreat, our Regulators slowly and cautiously made their way down the valley, soon striking a sort of ravine, that seemed to have been once the bed of a river, but which had either found another course or whose sources had become dry. Upon either side the nearly perpendicular banks rose to the height of ten feet, covered at the top by a growth of pine and hemlock, all tending to exclude what little light came from the partially obscured moon, which was still at least four hours high in the heavens, so it was not without considerable difficulty that they were enabled to advance over the uneven, rock strewn bottom.

Down the ravine half a mile, perhaps, and our friends suddenly found their way obstructed by a kind of log and brush barrier. What did it mean? Pausing a moment, they heard the moving and stamping of horses' feet. They realized in an instant that it was an inclosure where the outlaws corraled their

animals. The banditti of course were not far distant.

The moon was then hidden behind a heavy black cloud, making it pitchy dark in the gloomy ravine, so the scouts were obliged to wait for the moonlight before they could get any idea of their true situation. Then, as it gradually grew lighter, they saw that the rocky banks of the canon here rose to the height of nearly forty feet, receding upon either side, covered here and there with patches of stunted bushes, overtopped above by large oaks, whose branches, reaching far out over the verge of the cliffs, nearly met, making it, even in mid-day, dark and dismal below.

For a moment it seemed as if they were barred from proceeding further. Then they saw what appeared to be a sort of natural path, which wound its way upon the side of the right-hand cliff, gradually ascending. This commenced four or five feet from the bottom, but was quite easily accessible by artificial steps.

A moment the Regulators hesitated as to the expediency of pursuing the path, for that appeared to be their only way of going further. After a hurried consultation, carried on in a low whisper, they decided to follow up the clue, let the consequence be what it might.

Going a short distance, the pathway was fringed on the outer edge with a thick growth of bushes, leaving barely room between them and the cliff for a person to pass, and concealing him from all outside view.

Cautiously, the wary scouts advanced. Soon they were over the corral of horses, and by a flash of moonlight, that ever and anon would fit out from behind the partially clouded sky, illuming the scene with a somber brightness, they could count about thirty.

Thus far the way had not shown any appearance of having ever been traveled before; but a point was soon reached where it was again accessible from the ravine below; and after this it bore unmistakable signs of being a regular footpath. Though fully realizing the peril of their undertaking, the Regulators, not satisfied with what they had already discovered, still pressed on, exercising the utmost caution in their movements.

Suddenly Mark, who was in advance, caught the sound of human voices ahead, which caused them to pause; and while hesitating whether to proceed further, or to turn back, and give it up as a bad job, they heard footsteps approaching behind.

Good Heaven! they were in a trap! The path had now carried them half way to the top of the bluff, and was still ascending. Twenty feet of cliff above! twenty feet of chasm below! the foe in front! the foe behind! Lost by their own rashness!

These were the thoughts that flashed through the minds of the Regulators, as they realized the peril of their position.

To keep on seemed folly; to turn back would be death from their enemies, who had already gained the path, and were rapidly coming nearer and nearer.

The moon was behind a cloud, so that utter darkness veiled the scene; but this, where they were, would not protect them from the outlaws. A meeting was inevitable.

"Over the cliff!" hissed Gil Rey, "an' hang under the edge of the bushes! 'Tis our only chance!"

The plan was feasible; and noiselessly the Regulators pushed through the line of growth, carefully letting themselves down the side of the cliff to their full length, supporting their weight from the shrubbery, the thick foliage of which completely hid them from view.

With bated breath, they heard the outlaws come nearer and nearer, until they were almost above them—would soon be passing. Mark was hoping—ay, thinking—they would pass without trouble. But Gil Rey suddenly felt a thrill of terror shoot through his frame, as he felt the bush upon which he was suspended yield beneath the strain of his weight. In vain he tried to clutch another. He tried to speak to Mark, but his tongue seemed paralyzed, and his mind could only grasp the

thought of the depth below, while he felt himself going—going—

CHAPTER XIII.

A FEARFUL DOOM.

WITH a loud snap the tree parted, and Gil Rey went crashing down upon the canon's rocky bottom twenty feet below. Startled, Mark came near losing his own hold, as he heard the noise and realized the sudden, awful fate of his comrade.

The surprised outlaws paused abruptly, and hastily parting the bushes, the leader peered out over the cliff, to ascertain the cause of the disturbance, when, by the moonlight that suddenly lit up the scene, he looked right into the face of the Regulator.

Mark felt that his time had come. To loosen his hold upon the bush would be to challenge death; and captivity at the hands of the outlaws meant nothing less. But he was given not a moment for reflection. Rude hands seized him, and he was lifted upon the pathway above, and secured a captive.

A part of the bandits turned back to seek the bottom of the ravine, while the others continued on with their prisoner.

A short distance, and they were halted by a sentinel, when giving the password, they stood the next instant upon a sort of platform, which extended around a huge rock, that shelved out over their heads, cutting off all means of a higher ascent. Turning the angle, they suddenly came upon a chasm in the rock, that seemed to have been the work of a mighty convulsion. This fissure extended back about a dozen feet to the abrupt ledge of the cliff, and was barely wide enough to admit a single person at a time.

Quickly lighting a torch, the leader entered the dark cleft without hesitation. The cold muzzle of a pistol held to his temple, forced Mark to follow, succeeded by the rest of the gang.

The dark passageway gradually descended for the first forty feet, and then it continued on a nearly level course.

High above them, on either side, rose the granite rock, solid and stupendous. But as they advanced the sound of loud talk and boisterous laughter greeted their ears, out of the inky-black space beyond, growing plainer and plainer as they proceeded, until suddenly they came upon the mouth of a cavern in the rock to the right; when a wild, weird scene burst upon their vision.

The cavern was lit up by a row of torches stuck in a crevice in the surrounding wall, showing, with a phantom-like glimmer, the forms of a score of coarse, bearded, brutal-looking men, seated in a circle near the center, gambling, drinking and carousing.

As our party entered the cavern, the motley crowd arose from their games, and catching sight of Mark, turned upon him with a look of malignant scorn.

"Ha, Joe! whom have you there?" exclaimed a quick, nervous-toned voice; and a man dressed in a suit of black, wearing a dark mask upon his face, from beneath which a pair of eyes gleamed like coals of fire, stepped forward from the others. It was Black Wayne, the masked outlaw.

"Wal, Cap," said the one addressed as Joe, "I reckon he am the chap yer sent me arter. Leastways, we found him too near hyar fer it to be healthy fer us, and so we jist took him along with us. But, he's a game one. Gived us a right smart tussle to flop him."

Seizing the torch from the speaker's hand, the masked outlaw thrust it in the Regulator's face; but as he caught sight of his features, he gave an involuntary cry, and staggered back against the wall, exclaiming, as he rallied a moment later:

"This is not the one I sent you for, but his capture is to me a hundred-fold better. Ay, Joe Corinth, this has been the best night's work you ever did!"

Turning to Mark he continued:

"Well, my Regulator, it seems we meet at last, as I have long wished."

"This is not our first meeting, outlaw, and it will not be the last," answered Waring, doggedly.

"Don't be too sure of that; I have not waited so long for this day to let you escape me now. No, Mark Waring; you will never live to see daylight again!"

"Boast while you can, braggart," retorted Mark; "but remember that I have friends."

"None that can reach me," replied the other, exultantly. "My plans are laid for the future. Before the rising of another sun, I shall be leagues from here. Dog! it is you that has made me all this trouble! It was you that robbed me of Bessie Raymun that night! Curse you! I am not one to be baffled! I always triumph in the end. But in your dungeon awaiting death—starvation—you will have time to think of all this. Men, follow with him."

As the outlaw ceased speaking, he plunged into the dark passage that led from the cavern, holding the torch so as to light up as much as possible the place of more than Stygian darkness. His followers, with Mark, kept close behind.

Threading the dismal passage, hemmed in upon either side by walls of granite, now turning to the left, then to the right, and again to the left, through another cavern, and then again following a narrow, circuitous passageway, the masked outlaw at last paused upon the very brink of a black abyss.

"There is your grave," said the outlaw, pointing as he spoke to the frightful depths. "It is twenty feet to the bottom, with solid rock upon every side, and no chance of getting out; so don't buoy up your hopes for nothing. You will not be the first who has perished there; let that console you."

Mark tried to free his hands, but in vain. In an instant he was being forced down the rope ladder that had been hanging from the place. As he was commencing the descent aided by a couple of his captors, the outlaw leader, removing his mask, hissed in the Regulator's face:

"This is what you get for crossing my path!"

"Put on that mask again, Len Moore," cried Mark, defiantly; "it becomes you. Black as the thing is, it is snow white compared with your heart. But, your day of reckoning is not far distant! Remember my words, you are doomed—d-o-o-m-e-d!" he almost shouted.

Taking up the words with a mournful cadence, the rocky walls echoed them again and again, till the whole cavern seemed filled with melancholy sound.

Brave and reckless as he was, the outlaw chief could not repress a thrill of terror, and he could not free his mind of the conviction that forced itself upon him.

A few minutes more and the outlaw's fiendish work had been consummated:—Mark Waring was alone in that fearful dungeon, with no chance of egress, his hands still secured behind him, a prisoner doomed to starvation! As soon as he had recovered from the first shock of terror at his situation, he commenced to make a circuit of his narrow prison; but the cold, solid rock met him at every step—a wall of granite twenty feet in height surrounding him upon every side! Suddenly his foot caught in something that made a rattling noise, when a phosphorescent light instantly sprang up from the corner, with a luminous brilliancy that revealed the skeleton of a former victim, who had perished in that dreadful place. Oh! the soul-sickening sense of horror that swept over his very soul. He, the strong-hearted man groaned in his utter despair and dread.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE REGULATORS TO THE FRONT.

As the shrub gave away, Gil Rey felt himself going down, down, into the ragged depths below! Instinctively he closed his eyes, as if to shut out the fate awaiting him. But as the cliff receded from the bottom this somewhat

retarded his progress, and clutching wildly the stunted bushes that grew upon its side, though they would not bear his weight, he was enabled to break the force of his fall, so that, save some severe bruises, he reached the ravine alive and unharmed.

Hardly realizing for the moment his unexpected escape, the Regulator staggered to his feet and leaned against the cliff. But the sound of a struggle above quickly aroused him, and though the bushes hid all from view, he felt that Mark was in trouble; still he was powerless to help him.

"Peg my buttons!" he ejaculated, in an undertone, "but this am the wusserest fix I ever see'd. Mark'll git gobbled up sartin; an' hyar I am with no show to help him. But I reckon I'd better git up an' dust, else the varmints'll hev my ha'r. Where'd my old shooter fall? I guess it am putty well bu'sted."

A moment's search, and the Regulator found his rifle where it had fallen, sustaining no serious injury. Then, knowing that he could be of no help to Mark, and that his own safety demanded it, he made his way down the ravine as fast as possible, while exercising the utmost discretion.

Gil Rey was none too soon in his flight. Almost immediately he found that he was pursued, and a wild race followed. The outlaws were familiar with every inch of the ground, and, in addition to this advantage, carried a torch, which greatly facilitated their progress, though it at the same time enabled the Regulator to tell their exact course, and thus materially aided him.

At last the old mountaineer succeeded in eluding his pursuers, and he felt that he had escaped for at least a time. But how should he act? Alone he could not hope to rescue Mark, supposing he was living, which seemed very doubtful. He knew of no better course than to return as expeditiously as possible to Chesterville for the Regulators. With this resolution, he left the ravine at the first possible chance half a mile below; and in a circuitous route commenced to make his way back to the glade, where Mark and himself had left their horses.

After a somewhat perilous and laborious tramp, he reached the horses, which he found all right. Then, mounting his own, and leading the other, he shaped his course for Chesterville.

It was long before day that Gil Rey reached the Prairie Home; but early as was the hour, a crowd had already gathered there of anxious, excited men.

The Regulator was received with a glad welcome; but before he was allowed to tell his story, startling events were related by the others.

Rose Conrad had been mysteriously abducted. No trace of her could be found. And her father, Major Conrad, lay at the point of death, *shot by a copper bullet!*

No wonder then that the crowd was excited; no wonder they hailed the appearance of Gil Rey with delight, hoping as they did that he might bring the key to the mystery—something in regard to the outlaws' rendezvous that they could at last act, and not remain longer in the suspense of inactivity.

When Gil Rey had told his story, no urging was needed on the part of the Regulators for an immediate departure to the Red Lands. All seemed willing and desirous for immediate action.

As Curt Dash was still absent, no one knowing where he was, the old mountaineer was unanimously selected as leader and guide.

"By Randel Rock!" said the worthy named for that particular spot of the globe, "I'll tell yer, boys, now we ar' goin' fur the Old Nick hisself, so jess fix yer old shooters with silver bullets. I hev got mine slung slick; an' all I ask is to jess git my eye on the old cuss long enough to plum my weapon, an' ef I don't throw him cold, then yer ken say I'm a black an' tan fool without enny top-knot, and speak my shooter without enny hind sight. Wagh!"

"Pho, Rock!" exclaimed burly Hank Web-

ber, "I reckon this ar' chap that slings copper round so plenty, is no more or less than an outlaw. A thing o' lead'll tote him off, I'll warrant."

"But why didn't the cap'en's?" asked Dandy Rock, slowly. "I'll tell yer, Hank Webber, this ar' no outlaw, but a real live spook uv thet dead feller uv a stranger."

"What do speerits want o' wimmen-folks?" queried the other.

How Rock would have answered is only to be guessed, for at this juncture a horseman was heard approaching, and in a moment Curt Dash, pale, haggard and ghostly, dashed up to the door.

"Well, boys!" he cried, "what's up?"

In a few hurried words, Curt was told what had transpired during his absence, and, also, the meditated plans for the future.

"You are right, boys; we must move at once. I have come with the very same intentions, for Gil is not alone in his discovery of the outlaws' retreat, as I, too, found their den this very night. The abduction of Miss Conrad and the capture of Mark make immediate action imperative."

"For God's sake, cap'en! what's been the trouble?" cried Hank Webber, as he saw the deathly pallor of their leader's face.

"It is of no account now," said Curt, "and I am a fool for showing it. But," he added, slowly, "I cannot help shuddering as I think of it, though the danger is safely passed. After running the very gantlet of death from the outlaws, I was pursued to the edge of yonder chaparral by that fearful phantom, the Dead Duelist. Every moment I expected would be my last, as I heard the demon's mocking laugh; but I have been spared, and I pray God I may live to see the mystery solved."

A few minutes later the Regulators were mounted, and speeding away on their mission.

CHAPTER XV.

BAFFLED AGAIN.—RIDING TO DEATH.

UNDER the guidance of Curt Dash and Gil Rey, the Regulators reached the ravine where their foes were supposed to be rendezvoused, without difficulty.

Half a mile below the cavern, they halted, when it was decided that a reconnaissance should be made by a couple of them before proceeding further in a body.

Curt and Gil volunteered their services; and after agreeing upon a signal should they get into trouble, the twain left their comrades for the perilous undertaking.

Save the twittering of birds, not a single sound broke the morning stillness that hung over the ravine. More like phantoms than human beings, our Regulators glided noiselessly along, keeping close under the cliff.

At last the corral was reached, when to their surprise they found that the horses, which were there the night before, were all gone.

What did it mean?

"I am afraid we are too late," whispered Curt; "this looks as if the birds had flown."

"Gone off on a rampage, mebbe," suggested Gil; "or p'raps they hain't got back frum last night's. S'posen we go up an' see how it looks. I'm mighty shaky 'bout Mark an' Miss Rose."

"We may be running into a trap," answered the chief; "but, be it as it will, I don't see any better course. Now, be careful; a single misstep may cost us our lives."

As the Regulator ceased speaking, he commenced the ascent of the path, closely followed by his companion.

Slowly and cautiously they worked their way along, until at last they stood at the mouth of the chasm. No sentinel had met them there. All was as silent as death within. Should they run the risk of all danger and enter the cavern of midnight gloom?

"We are in for it," whispered Curt, tightening his belt a notch, and clutching his rifle

nervously, as he stepped down the narrow entrance to the cave.

Brave as the Regulators were, they could not help shuddering as they entered the fearful place.

"It is impossible to proceed without a torch," said Curt, suddenly stopping; "we shall inevitably get lost in the darkness and perish in this foul den. What need is there of going further? The outlaws have doubtless fled, and we shall be obliged to seek them elsewhere."

But Mark—p'raps we may find some trace o' him. He may be confined in hyar somewhere. Let's go a little further."

"All right," answered Curt; "I am with you," and again they commenced to grope their way forward, keeping hold upon the ledge on one side to guide their course.

Slowly they progressed for perhaps a hundred and fifty feet, when, suddenly, Curt, who was in advance, ran against an angle of the massive rock, which seemed to bar the passage.

"Hold one moment," said the Regulator chief, "while I discharge one of my revolvers."

For an instant the flash lit up the scene, disclosing to them a cavern to the right; and then, as the gloom again enveloped the place, the report went echoing and re-echoing back to the furthest depths, seeming to fairly die away in the distance.

"Can't we find something for a light?" asked Gil. "We can't git along without one."

"I thought I saw the stump of a torch in the cavern there. We must find it."

After considerable difficulty, they succeeded in entering the cavern; when, by flashing some powder, they managed to ignite a quantity of raw cotton, which they carried for wadding. A half-burnt torch was soon found, which they quickly lighted.

By the gloomy light of the torch, our Regulators were enabled to proceed in their search; but, after a half-hour's fruitless labor, they were fain to give it up. No trace could be found of their friend; nothing to tell of his fate.

In one of the subterranean cavities they stumbled upon a forge, around which lay tools of various kinds, and, scattered about, a few pieces of bogus coin of the Mexican stamp.

"Counterfeiters, as well as robbers and murderers!" ejaculated Curt.

"Well, Gil," said the Regulator chief, at last, "it seems folly to search longer. Mark is either dead, or the outlaws have taken him with them. The boys will think we have got into trouble, and will be uneasy, so let us get out of this infernal region as soon as possible. Ugh! it makes me shiver all over."

"Mark must be rubbed out," muttered the old mountaineer, more to himself than his companion.

"Yes," assented Curt; "it seems more than probable. Poor fellow! A nobler man never lived in Shelby. But, Gil Rey, there is a day of reckoning coming to those fiends in human shape. Mark Waring's fate shall not be forgotten."

"God bless yer, cap'en! Give us yer paw on that!"

In the dismal gloom, dimly visible by the weird light of the flickering torch, like grim phantoms, the two friends clasped hands and agreed to stand or fall together in the perilous work of bringing the ruffian freebooters to justice.

Then the Regulators commenced to retrace their steps toward daylight; and at last the somber darkness was left behind. When in the open air they breathed easier.

Down the cliff they slowly descended, and succeeded in joining their anxious comrades without delay.

A short distance above where the main body of Regulators had lain in waiting for their leaders, a place was discovered where the outlaws went to and from the ravine. It was a precipitous and dangerous pathway, but bore evidence of having been traveled by horses. Thus our party sought its ascent to gain the

Red Lands above, which they wished to reach, though with what motive they hardly knew.

The last Regulator had barely gained the summit, when an object was seen to leave the growth a quarter of a mile to the north, and rush out upon the clearing that stretched between it and the canon.

It was a horse and rider, appearing to fly over the barren waste, while close behind pursued two other horsemen, telling that it was a stern race for life or death.

In a moment it is seen that the foremost is a woman. Good Heaven! Rose Conrad, fleeing from the outlaws!

The discovery, sudden as it was, is followed instantly by another as startling as that was unexpected. She has already gained two-thirds of the distance, and is riding like the wind right toward the yawning canon!

The pursuers suddenly stop, as if by magic.

With loud shouts the Regulators warn her of danger. They shriek again and again for her to stop or turn aside. But, heeding not, hearing not, in the wild confusion, their frantic cries, dreaming only of danger from the rear, she still keeps on and on, faster and faster, nearer and nearer the frightful precipice!

Their faces blanched to an ashen hue, the Regulators see her rushing on to certain death, powerless to avert her inevitable doom.

Suddenly the forty feet of rocky depth yawns before her. With a startling cry, she realizes her peril, and tries to check the headlong course of her flying steed. She tries to turn him aside.

Too late!

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SHOT IN THE BRAIN.

VALL DECKERS, the most self-possessed of all the Regulators, alone saw a chance to save the fleeing fugitive. A chance which, though it seemed but one in a thousand, instantly called into action his decision of character.

The moment he saw that their warnings were not likely to be heard, he dashed out from among his companions, and rode like lightning down to the point which she must inevitably pass. Then, wheeling his horse, he paused upon the very brink of the precipice, facing the depths; and had just brought his faithful animal into position, when Rose Conrad rode down like the wind.

As she swept past, the strong arm of the Regulator encircled her form, and she was lifted free and clear from her gallant steed, which, with a neigh of terror, went over the brink, and down upon the rocks below, a shapeless mass of bone and flesh.

With a shout for the heroic act, the others quickly rode forward.

"Are you hurt, Miss Conrad?" asked Vall, with more emotion than he was wont to show, as the other was assisted from her rather awkward position.

"No; I thank you; only frightened. But, kind sir, it is to you I owe my life. How can I ever repay you? Please accept my thanks. Poor, poor Hero! he could not be saved. Why was I so blind? Oh, I can not help shuddering as I think of the awful fate to which I was rushing! Again I thank you! I thank you!"

"Beg pardon, Miss Conrad, I am more than paid already. Besides, it was only my duty. I saw there was a chance to save you, and I should have been more than a brute had I not improved it."

"By gracious Peter!" exclaimed Dandy Rock, "why couldn't I jest thought u' doin' that? I'd let sich a purty one es you ar' thank me all day afore I'd cry 'nough!"

"You have my thanks all the same, Rock," said Rose, blushing at the other's rude compliment; "I do not doubt but you would risk your life to save mine."

"D'ye hyar that? Jess bring on the chap thet says I won't! But it am all fur the best, I s'pose. He done it so much more graceful than sich a rough and tumble prairie chick es I am could. Wal, I always war the most on-luckiest feller thet ever wore a topknot; but it am all owing to the brungin' up, I s'pose."

In the meanwhile Gil Rey, ever active, followed by half a dozen of the others had gone in pursuit of the outlaws, who had suddenly disappeared from view on the other side of the clearing.

"Excuse me, Miss Conrad," ventured Curt, "but I would like to ask how you escaped the outlaws? If I am not mistaken you have been in their hands. It was to effect your rescue that, in part, brought us here."

"I was seized last night and borne off by Black Wayne and his followers; but by the aid of Providence I escaped them this morning, though that escape came near costing me my life."

"Perhaps Miss Rose will favor us with her story," supplemented Mexican Pete.

In answer to the request, Rose gave the particulars of her abduction and escape, in substance as follows:

She and her father, returning from Colonel Raymun's, when near their own home were suddenly surrounded and ordered to surrender by half a dozen dark-visaged men, whom they quickly recognized as some of the outlaws. Refusing their demand, a sharp struggle ensued between Major Conrad and the desperadoes. In the midst of the contest Rose felt herself seized, and, in spite of her resistance, was borne away, a captive. Not knowing her father's fate, and expecting he had fallen a victim to the outlaws, she had suffered intense agony, slightly relieved, now, by the Regulators' story which they were careful to show bright side out.

She was not allowed to dismount from her horse, but with an outlaw riding upon either side, each holding a revolver ready for instant use should she make any outcry or attempt to escape, she was forced to leave home and friends behind, to go with her captors on a tedious journey to their haunt in the Red Lands, with a captivity worse than death staring her in the face.

At last after miles of weary riding, the outlaws drew rein, and all but two turned to the south-west, while they kept on with Rose in nearly a northerly course.

Thus far since her capture Rose had made no resistance or outcry, knowing it would be useless; but she was not one to be easily intimidated, and all the while her mind was devising some way of escape. When she saw the outlaws separate, and only two keep with her as guards, it seemed as if fortune was favoring her. Deceived by her apparent peaceable submission, they gradually, and perhaps unconsciously, relaxed their vigilance, doubtless thinking it impossible for her to escape. But, soon, she saw her chance. One of the outlaws had ridden slightly in advance; the other's attention was for the moment diverted from his charge. Quickly she wheeled her horse, and before the astonished captors recovered themselves and rushed in pursuit, she was out of reach of their fire, flying for life.

In the wild ride that succeeded she lost her way; but with the stubborn determination to follow the race to the bitter end, she kept on and on, until—well, the result is known.

"You heard nothing of Mark Waring?" suddenly asked Deckers, as Rose finished her story.

"Mark Waring? has aught befallen him?" cried the other, in an anxious tone.

"Alas, Miss Conrad! we fear it. He was taken by the outlaws last night, and we are in fearful suspense as to his fate."

"The outlaws made no mention of a prisoner, I am positive. But, can't you—can't you find any trace of him?"

"Ha-ha-ha-a-a-a-h-a-a-a!"

Like a thunderbolt from a clear sky, the hoarse, maniacal laugh fell upon the crowd. During Miss Conrad's recital, and the conversation that followed, they had slowly returned to the place of descent to the ravine. None had seen or heard the approach of any one. Thus startled by the fearful warning, they were astounded by beholding not four rods distant the dreadful phantom, One-Leg, the Dead Duelist!

For a moment the dead-alive being gazed up-

on the awe-stricken group, his piercing eyes wandering from one to another, till they seemed to become fixed upon Mexican Pete!

With a wild agonizing cry as if reading his doom, the Regulator attempted to reach his horse, from which he had dismounted a moment before. But no; that death-dealing rifle, already stained with human blood was brought to bear upon him. One despairing glance he cast around, hoping for an avenue of escape; but that grim muzzle alone seemed to meet his gaze. Then, with the frantic energy of a dying man, he sprung forward, and with a defiant yell, seized Rose Conrad, holding her before him, completely shielding his form.

As Mexican Pete held Rose before him, so that a shot from the strange horseman must inevitably hit her before touching him, he commenced to back toward the ravine, where the pathway made a descent practicable. Then the others saw his bold design; but would it succeed without a fearful sacrifice?

A moment of intense suspense, and Pete has gained the canon's brink; one instant more and he will be down its precipitous side, safe. But hold! Another laugh, and the Dead Duelist glances along the barrel of his rifle.

Quick as a flash Vall Deckers and Curt Dash raise their rifles but not soon enough to avert the impending shot. The quick spang of the rifle, and the bullet has gone on its mission; the fatal deed is done!

One Leg, the Dead Duelist, has scored another victim.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE NIGHT-TERROR.

WITH a wild death-cry, Mexican Pete threw up his arms, and fell half-way down the canon's bank, where a boulder caught his lifeless body. Rose Conrad also uttered a sharp piercing shriek, and would have fallen back into the depths had it not been for Dandy Rock Randel, who sprung forward and received her in his arms as tenderly as if she had been an infant, and carefully laid her upon the green sward.

In an instant the others press around, with eager, anxious faces.

"My God! this is terrible!" cried Curt Dash. "Is she dead?"

"Dead!" echoed Rock. "Lord bless ye, cap'en, she hain't even scarred."

The Regulator was right. Rose had not been touched; and save the fright she had received, was unhurt. In a few minutes she was herself again.

"Wal, dog my cats!" exclaimed Hank Webber, "this ar' a glad s'prise. But I reckon poor Pete hain't fared so well."

"Whar's my shooter?" suddenly cried Rock. "I jess want to try my silver slug on them fire-balls."

"Shoo!"

The exclamation was jerked from the Regulator by the discovery that the mysterious horseman had suddenly disappeared. In the confusion he had been temporarily forgotten, and had silently withdrawn, unobserved by all, though it seemed impossible.

"Wal, I reckon it am all fer the best," said Rock, slowly, after a pause; "my narves are all in a stew now."

"Hyar, Gus, lend us a hand," cried Hank; and a few minutes later the body of Mexican Pete was brought up the bank, and laid upon the level ground.

A hurried examination of the wound was sufficient to solve the mystery of Rose Conrad's escape, and his sudden death. He had been shot through the forehead, and thus his head must have been a little higher than hers, probably in looking over to watch his enemy; and upon that hair's-breadth the Dead Duelist, with his unerring skill, had risked and done so much.

"Well, boys," said the Regulator chief, as he arose from the side of their dead comrade, "another one of us has gone, without a single blow in defense. How long is this going to continue? until we all fall victims to that fiend, and to Black Wayne and his tools? Men, we have too long been inactive. We must do

something to stop this, or the consequences will be upon our own heads."

"Right, pard," exclaimed Dandy Rock; "give us yer paw on that. But I'll bet yer my top-knot thet Rock Randel 'll be the one to lay out thet spook. Wagh!"

As no one was inclined to accept the wager, Rock seemed to have the field to himself.

Rose Conrad, nearly exhausted after the trying scenes through which she had passed, was anxious to return home. So it was decided that four of the Regulators should go back to Chesterville with her, while the others remained in the Red Lands.

Soon Rose and her escorts were bidding the others adieu.

"Well, Rock," she said, holding that worthy's hand, "I suppose you feel better now you and Mr. Deckers are even. I can not find words to—"

"There, there, Miss Rose, don't. As Vall said, it war nothin', noth—" and here the speech of the confused Regulator actually broke down. Evidently, he was not so well prepared to receive his thanks as he had expected.

As the homeward bound ones took their departure, Curt and the others turned their attention to the burying of their unfortunate friend.

Just as the solemn task was ended, Gil Rey and his party returned, startled to learn of the fearful events that had transpired during their absence.

They had ascertained nothing new. The outlaws had escaped them, though they had traced them as far as Chester plain, where they lost the trail, and could not find it again.

"Come, cap'en, what's the word?" demanded Hank Webber.

"Well," answered the Regulator chief, after a pause, "the outlaws have left here now, it is true; but I believe it is only a temporary absence. Therefore my idea is to scout around here as quietly as possible to-day; and to-night perhaps something will turn up in our favor. Some of them may return, and if so, we must be on our watch, and effect their capture. Then, indeed, we shall be on the road to success."

Slowly the hours wore away, till another day had gone. Nothing had happened worthy of recording; and at its close the Regulators tethered their horses, and made a few hasty preparations for a night's bivouac upon nearly the same spot where Gil Rey met Mark Waring the night they discovered the bandits' retreat.

Two of their number were absent; and the others were becoming uneasy, fearing something had befallen them.

Vall Deckers, selecting Gil Rey as a companion, the two had gone back to the outlaws' cave, to search in its subterranean cavities for some clue of their missing friend. Since noon they had been gone, and Hank Webber and Long Gus were about to volunteer to go in search of their comrades, when, suddenly, a horseman was heard approaching from the prairie at a smart canter.

The Regulators sprung to their feet, as the rider dashed into the valley; when, catching sight of them, he turned abruptly toward the Red Lands.

It was Black Wayne, the masked outlaw.

Curt Dash, first to act, sent a rifle-ball after the fast receding bandit.

Mounting and riding in hot haste followed. But it was in vain; for from the beginning the outlaws had seemed to be endowed with a charmed existence, and the Regulators doomed to disappointment.

The Regulator chief, foremost in the wild chase, was last to return. But he had neared the valley, when the sound of a low, mournful cry caused him to stop. Then, though not a single living object, man or beast, save his own, was in sight, he distinctly heard the hoof-strokes of a horse approach—*pass him!* and then a laugh, the report of a rifle, the shriek of a dying person, the falling of a body, and

another laugh succeeded, followed by the stillness of death.

It was the exact repetition of what he and Vall Deckers heard back of the Prairie Home.

Brave and reckless as Curt Dash was, really fearing nothing in flesh and blood, his face paled to a ghostly hue, and he actually fled.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DANDY ROCK TRIES THE VIRTUE OF HIS SILVER BULLET.—A SCENE OF TERROR.

GIL REY and Vall Deckers are returning.

Soon they have tethered their horses, and are about to join their comrades. But suddenly, just by the edge of the valley, they pause. Their companions watch them in wonder. Yet only for a moment.

Out from the growth above bursts the Dead Duelist. On he came right toward them.

As he neared the Regulators, he instantly stopped; and though it was then quite dark under the thick timber of the bottom, his form was distinctly seen, his movements terribly apparent.

With a laugh, he raised his rifle and glanced along its length. Gil Rey uttered a cry of terror, for the weapon was pointed at him. A blinding flash—a deafening report!

Vall Deckers, seeing his companion's peril, with his quick decision bounded forward, with almost superhuman agility, reached the side of the strange rider, to throw up the barrel of his rifle, just as the shot was fired; the bullet missed its mark; Gil Rey was saved.

The maddened fiend turned upon Vall. He half raised his rifle, and then, as if realizing it was empty, he dashed wildly through the growth for the prairie beyond.

Vall fired after his retreating form, but the shot seemed to have no effect.

"By Randel Rock!" he cried, as the horseman turned from Vall; "I'm jess the old coon to do it, an' I will! I know thet 'll fetch him! Won't I make 'em *spile!* Now, or never! Wagh!"

He rushed forward to intercept the Phantom Rider. Evidently, Rock meant business. He was going to risk his fate where others had failed; try the supposed charmed virtue of a silver bullet where lead would have no effect.

"Hilloa there, Mister Spook!" cried Rock as he came out upon the edge of the prairie directly in the path of the oncoming rider.

Whether the words, or the sudden appearance of the Regulator was the cause, the horseman quickly wheeled to make off in an opposite direction.

"Hyar, yer infernal One! yer don't git off in thet way!" shrieked Rock.

As if in answer to the threat, the strange rider turned and rode swiftly down under the shade of the timber.

Calmly Rock awaited the onset. Breathless the Regulators in the background watched the scene.

If the horseman thought to intimidate Rock, he failed; thus, if he was a human being in flesh and blood, he seemed rushing to certain destruction, for the Regulator was a good shot, and stood his ground with rigid determination.

"Take thet, old Tearer!" cried Dandy Rock, as, with quick but certain aim, his finger pressed the trigger. But to his dismay *his rifle hung fire!*

"Good God! I'm a goner!" fairly shrieked the terrified Regulator, as the grim rider still kept on. Then, with one dismal howl, he dropped his rifle, and fled for dear life.

The horseman, with a laugh, changed his course a trifle, and did not attempt to follow his discomfited assailant.

There is a limit even to the bravery of brave men. Rock, actually overcome with fright and running, fell headlong into a thicket, groaning:

"Don't! don't! Mister Stranger! I war in fun! I didn't 'tend ter—"

"What are you about here?" suddenly asked Curt Dash, as he and the others reached the spot in season to hear their companion's pitiful supplications.

"Is he g-g-gone?" gasped Rock.

"Yes; this half hour" answered Hank.

"But what's the trouble, Rock? You look like a spook; and what made yer run so?" asked the burly Regulator, while a merry twinkle glistened in his eye.

"Trouble!" echoed the other, starting to his feet. "Didn't ye see'd me? Arter I'd fixed my rifle with a silver bullet and primed her slick, *she missed!* I tell yer, boys," he added solemnly, "I know now that thet thing is a spook! Hereafter, he an' me are goin' on two trails!"

It was not so much his words as his strangely solemn, woe-begone countenance, that caused the roar of laughter which followed.

Suddenly, in the midst of this mirth, death looked upon the scene and laughed! Death in the shape of the Phantom Horseman.

Merriment turned to terror!

Vall Deckers, standing a little apart from the others, hastily reloading his rifle, seemed the designated object; all felt that he was the doomed man!

CHAPTER XIX.

FATE OF HANK WEBBER.

"A HUNDRED dollars to the man who will rid us of that fiend!" cried Curt Dash, as it became evident that the Dead Duelist was returning, doubtless for another victim.

"By heavens, cap'en! I'm your man!" exclaimed Hank Webber; "I'll rub him out or go under!"

As the burly Regulator spoke, he drew one of his revolvers and looked carefully to its priming. He was evidently in earnest, and was then the most self-possessed person in the crowd, save, perhaps, Vall Deckers.

"Do it," said Curt, "and the money is yours."

"Hank Webber takes no blind oath!" came in reply. "He means jess what he says!"

The dreadful rider was certainly coming that way—would soon reach them!

"Heavens!" gasped a hoarse, stifled voice, "s'pose he's arter me?"

A crash in the bushes followed; and, save his heels, nothing was to be seen of Dandy Rock Randel. Evidently the Regulator had important business which demanded his immediate attention. But in the confusion that followed his absence was not noticed.

Bound by superstition's fearful dread, they watched the approach of the Dead Duelist, with intense interest.

"Thank God! he is going to pass!" exclaimed Long Gus Durrell.

The Regulator seemed right.

"By heavens, he don't pass!" cried Hank, with a look of stern determination. "He or I am goin' under!"

In silence the others waited the action of their giant companion; a man who had been known to overcome, single-handed, half a dozen picked men, in an open fight; a man who had never failed to accomplish his purpose, and whose prowess was barely matched in all Shelby county. Would he fail now?

With his usual laugh, though with less of menace in his manner than common, the mysterious horseman dashed down near to Vall Deckers, who stood his ground without flinching.

Hank Webber, waiting for this moment, sprung forward right into the demon rider's path, clutching in his right hand a pistol, while with the other he attempted to seize the roan horse's head, intending to check the course of his mounted foe; and then, inside the other's fire from his rifle, end his career, with a close shot, if he was not more than mortal. But no obstacle met his grasp, and he staggered head long, almost under the animal's feet.

As the Ranger regained an upright position, he saw what he had lost. The muzzle of that fatal rifle met his gaze! Death was staring him in the face! A contemptuous laugh—a cry of terror—a sharp report—and Hank Webber was no more!

"Good Heaven!" cried Vall Deckers, who had finished reloading his rifle, "your horse is not a phantom if you are!" and, standing less

than ten feet distant, he fired directly at the roan steed; but, horse and rider, unhurt—untouched—instantly disappear in the timber.

No move was made to follow him; no one in the relief of his departure thought or cared to seek his trail.

"Is Hank dead?" some one ventured to ask.

"Don't you know better than to ask that, Bill Smiley?" half-questioned, half-answered Vall Deckers. "His rifle never misses!"

Then the Regulators pressed around the unconscious form of their unfortunate comrade. "Boys," said the chief, "he died for our sakes! Let's give him a decent burial."

An hour later, the mortal remains of Hank Webber had been consigned to the dust from whence they came.

All this time passed, and no one was aware of the continued absence of Rock Randel. Then, it was suddenly noticed that he was missing.

Surprised, the Regulators commenced a thorough search through the surrounding growth for their friend. But nothing of him could be found. Still, thinking that he had probably only wandered away, and would soon come back, they returned to their bivouac, to seek the rest they so much needed.

Another hour passed by, and still Rock had not returned. Curt Dash, moving uneasily under his blanket, saw Vall Deckers steal away toward the horses. Curious to learn the meaning of the Ranger's singular action, the captain noiselessly followed, and saw the other mount his blood-bay, and crossing the valley, ride away to the Red Lands.

"That means no good," said Curt, as he told his companions of what he had seen. "I have half a mind to follow."

"Yer might es well try ter foller a rattler," replied Gil Rey. "He's an old coon, he is, on a trail. Got an eye jess like a painter's. He jess knocks the hind sights off o' ennything this side o' Pike's Peak. Wag!"

"But couldn't you find anything of Mark Waring to-day?" suddenly asked the Regulator chief.

"Nary a once. We s'arched the hull inside o' the world, but it war a blind trail. Nary a chip. Mark ar' a gone beaver."

Morning brought not the return of Vall Deckers; but it did bring a new discovery. *Long Gus Durrell was gone, and nothing of him could be found.*

Can we blame the Regulators if they turned their faces toward Chesterville?

In the meanwhile, when Rock Randel, suffering from his severe fright, and really believing that the Dead Duelist was coming for vengeance upon him, sought the protection of the forest, he had barely passed through the thicket, when he suddenly ran upon an object in his course, which threw him headlong to the earth. Ere he could regain his feet, a couple of men rushed upon him, quickly overpowering him in spite of his resistance, and he was borne away from his comrades, a captive in the hands of his most dreaded foe.

CHAPTER XX.

DANDY ROCK'S ADVENTURE.

NOT a word was spoken by Rock's captors as they half carried, half led him away. They had secured his hands, but, for their own convenience, had allowed him the use of his lower limbs. There were but two of them, and they had done a bold deed, and done it well. It seemed more like a dream to the Regulator than reality.

Passing around to the east side of the bluff, which we have before had occasion to mention, the desperadoes at last paused.

"*Cospita!* We have no need to go further. The others will never find us, so let us do our work, and be off."

By the moonlight glimmering through the tree-tops, Rock was enabled for the first time to get anything like a fair view of his captors. One, as he already knew, was the Mexican, San Mullre; but the other, a filthy-looking,

burly-framed person of the same nationality, was a stranger. Both were armed to the teeth, so to speak, and certainly were determined desperadoes. Each held a pistol in his hand, and his lynx-like eyes, glowing as a panther's watching its prey, never for a moment relaxed their vigilance. The Regulator saw no hope of escape; but resolved to make the best of his situation, he exclaimed, laconically:

"Wal, old yaller-hide, I hope yer feel better!"

"*Malditos Mericano!*" (cursed American) "once more you are mine!" cried the other, exultantly.

"By Hookey, old Greaser, it does look as though you'd wrung a cold deal on me, ennyway. But, jess ye wait an' I'll stop ye, same's I did afore, see ef I don't."

"*Por dios!*" exclaimed the Mexican, angrily, "I will see that you don't repeat the thing again. That shall make me careful. Fortune has favored in your capture, for though Juan and myself were spying round your camp to get a shot at you, we didn't think of getting you so easily. But for one thing we shouldn't have taken the trouble to have brought you so far."

"Shoo! Wal, would hev suited me jess as well ef ye hedn't. Sorry to hev troubled ye so. But jess let go, and I won't bother yer a minnit longer. Say the word, and I'm off like a sage rabbit."

"Fool! Do you think I have taken all this trouble for nothing? I have one question to ask you, and then I am done."

"A q-u-e-s-t-i-o-n to ax me? S'posen't I won't answer?"

"Then you die!"

"Whew! Then ef I spit it out on the square, I ken hev my walkin'-papers? Wal, thet am talkin'. Jess heave ahead, old hoss, with yer axin'; I feel like answerin' ennythin', from the Gulf to the Rocker Mountains."

"Then, you will answer it?"

"Yes, old beauty; I don't care what it am, ef ye'll only free my paws, an' give me a chance to scratch gravel."

"You are mine to do with as I think proper."

"Sho! Then you're my daddy! Hain't seen ye since I left the old coop. Can't ye fix it so I ken give ye a hand-shook?"

It was evident Rock was trying to gain time.

"Tell me"—and the Mexican seemed terribly in earnest—"is that strange-looking horseman, with one leg, the rider of the roan steed, in league with Brad Wayne and his outlaws, or is he one of the men called Regulators?"

"Whoop—"

"Dog! another cry like that and I'll brain you!"

"Scuse me, pard; I forgot. But I'm jess the old coon to tell yer all yer want ter know 'bout thet spook. Thet's what tickled me so, an' made me holler."

"*Cospita!* Who is he?"

"This old prairie chick ar' just the beaver thet knows. He knows like a book. But what makes ye so mighty anxious 'bout him? Any relation?"

"*Caramba!* He killed a friend. I have sworn that he shall die, though he is Brad Wayne's own brother."

"That's right, old Greaser, heave ahead; an' I want ter be round when ther fun's up. I reckon I've had some 'sperience thar myself. Knock him over; it be jess fun."

"But who is he?" and the question was repeated with increased earnestness.

Jess undo my paws, and mebbe I'll feel like telling. I don't want ter take enny advantage uv you 'pindlin' leetle feller; but, as yer two an' I'm one, jess give me one uv my shooters an' a tooth-pick, an' I'll tell yer all yer want ter know 'bout him, an' more too."

"Dog of an American!" hissed the Mexican, "I am not trifling!"

"But yer sed ye w'd let me free ef I would answer yer question. Now, I'm ready ter keep my word. Cut ther rope."

"Never!"

"Wildcats! But warn't ye in 'arnest? I war."

"I have decided that you shall be thrown off yonder precipice, and upon the *canada's* rocky bottom your mangled carcass will be food for the buzzards."

While a strange look gleamed from his eyes, Rock's countenance seemed to elongate fully two inches, as he heard his condemnation, and gazed toward the canon, less than two rods distant.

"Then I'm to answer yer question an' git nothin' fur it? Yer ter hev all ther fun, an' I'm to do the work. This coon don't hitch."

"San Mullre don't forget nor forgive. He will have his vengeance!"

"By Randel Rock! I like yer pluck, old yaller-skin. But I reckon two can play at thet game. This beaver don't shell—"

"Oh-oh-o-o-h-oh!"

In an instant Rock's whole demeanor had changed. With a fearful contortion of the face, he was suddenly bent nearly double, groaning and shrieking in anguish.

"Oh! I'm a goner! I'm kilt! Oh my! rubbed out! gone under! Oh!—oh—o—help! hel—"

"*Caramba!*" cried San Mullre. "What is the matter?"

"Oh! cramps! I'm subject—oh—to 'em! I hev 'em—oh—awfully! Can't ye—oh—I'm a gone sucker!" and all the while he was thrashing to and fro in the wildest agony. His captors keeping as near to him as possible were powerless to help him. Suddenly he fell headlong to the earth upon the canon's very brink! Another foot and he would have gone over. Then, with spasmodic twitching and jerking, he finally contracted himself into a heap after the fashion of an opossum, and not a muscle moved.

"*Valgame Dios!* The dog is dead!" cried Mullre.

Quickly reaching the spot, the twain bent low over the curled up form, when suddenly, like an arrow from a pent-up bow, a pair of heels shot through the air, striking the larger Mexican full in the stomach, and hurling him back into the canon, to fall upon the rocks forty feet below! Then, quick as a flash, the Regulator was upon his feet, and with all his power threw his body forward against San Mullre, who, with a wild death-shriek, followed his accomplice over the precipice.

"Whop! whoop!" shouted Rock, forgetting that he might have other foes in the vicinity, forgetting all else in his sudden triumph, and fairly dancing for excitement. "How's thet for cramps, old Greasers? I reckon yer plans hev changed! Can't fool Rock Randel so easy, if he is subject to cramps! whoop! But, good-by, old smoky-skins! long rest to ye! I'm goin' to git my paws undid, seein' ye won't do it!"

Well might Rock go on his way rejoicing, for he had played a sharp trick, and did it successfully. Well could he say as he hurried back to his comrades.

"Randel is a hard Rock to run against."

CHAPTER XXI.

WHO SHOT RANDEL?

It is the night following the scenes we have just related. The Regulators have gathered again but Long Gus Durrell has not returned—never will! His lifeless body has been found this afternoon on Chester plain! Mark Waring has not come back! Nothing has been learned of his fate! Vall Deckers has not been seen since the night before. He has probably either fled the country, or fallen a victim to the Dead Duelist! Mexican Pete and Hank Webber will never come back till the grave gives up its dead. Rock Randel, as we may suppose, came in good spirits, spite of the frequent hints and remarks concerning "silver bullets."

Some ten or a dozen are gathered at the Prairie Home, holding an animated discussion; the sole theme of their talk the events of the few past days.

"Was Gus shot with a copper bullet?" asks one.

"Yes," answers True Bill, who had been one of the party to find the Ranger's body; "plum through the head, same's all the rest!"

"This beaver don't chip the trail, he don't!" exclaims a tall, raw-boned Regulator, savoring strong of the mountain air. "Ef thar hain't sum ha'r-liftin' afore long, this chile 'll cache, he will! or be thrown cold! This coon don't be 'possum fur enny sneakin' coyote! be he Digger, Blackfoot, Greaser, or enny furrin galoot! D'ye hyar, neow? I'm half froze for ha'r! So shin up, old hosses!"

The last is directed to the group around him, as the speaker seeks relief from his trouble at the bar.

The men have barely gathered at the bar, when they are startled by the abrupt entrance of some one at the door. They turn; it is Rock Randel. But why is he so excited?

"Boyees!" cries the impetuous Regulator, "I have made a diskivery! I know the hull mystery!"

"What! of silver bullets?" asks Burley, facetiously, while an angry flush suffuses the other's face. It is certainly an ill-timed joke.

"No!" fairly howls Rock; "but I've jess overheard a talk in ther chaparral, an' I—"

Crack!

The report of a pistol suddenly rends the air!

With a cry of pain, Rock presses his hand upon his side, and falls heavily to the floor!

Listening to the Regulator's speech, the crowd had not seen a hand part the folds of the skin, which hangs in lieu of a door between the bar-room and that adjoining, had not seen a man with a cocked pistol, and a pair of glaring eyes in the background.

"Good God!" cries True Bill, "Rock is shot dead!"

Then, with wild shouts and angry cries, the men rush for the room from whence the shot had been fired. But, no one is there; though an open window seems to tell how and where the assassin has flown.

"Out, men! and after him!" cries Curt Dash. "Don't let him escape! Ha! what is that?"

The captain has suddenly seen a dark object lying on the floor. He picks it up. 'Tis a black mask!

"By time!" exclaims Gil Rey, "it war done by Black Wayne, es true es I'm a livin' beaver!"

"Come, men! we will find him if such a thing is possible! He can't escape, if we do our duty!"

A moment later, and but three men are left in the Prairie Home. True Bill and another have remained by Rock, and are trying to dress his wound, which they find deep and—well, they hope not fatal, though that hope hangs upon a slender thread. He has not returned to consciousness yet, and they are almost dreading it will be but the step to eternity.

"Poor boy!" murmurs Bill, "for nigh onto twenty years ye hev tramped with this old hoss, and many's the good turn ye hev done him. He always hed a hankerin' fer ye ever since he picked ye up when but a wee tottle o' a chick by Randel Rock. But, don't think he'll furgit ye, or how ye war rubbed out, fer he won't! No! He'll spend the rest o' his days in trappin' the sneakin' varmint! and once he lays eyes on him, all creation can't save him frum what he deserves! I swear it, by Randel Rock! Waugh!"

It seemed impossible for the outlaw to escape. The Regulators had not delayed in their action; but some had sought hasty egress through the window, others, out of the door. They had surrounded the house, searching it and the outer-buildings. They had scoured the plain, and hunted the chaparral. They had not forgotten the river-growth, or any known place of refuge. Some had mounted their horses, and ridden beyond the Rio Burte; others had hastened to the village and routed the settlement. But nowhere could they find their man; nothing could they find to tell the mystery of his escape.

Even the sluggish Orman Burley joined in the chase. Mounting his iron gray, he was one to ride to the river. But he has not been better rewarded for his trouble than the others; and at last he turns his horse for home.

Orman Burley, returning to the Prairie Home, is passing over the very same path that Curt Dash and Vall Deckers were on when they heard the Phantom Rider. But he is not dreaming of danger, as he rides leisurely along, when suddenly he feels, or seems to feel, that a horseman is silently following him! Quickly turning in his saddle, he sees, to his horror, that he is followed, not by a real horse and rider, but by the Dead Duelist, upon his phantom roan!

With a startling cry, he spurs his horse forward, hoping to escape by flight; but an invincible power quickly seizes him, and his onward course is abruptly checked. That fearful form is riding right by his side. That long dark rifle is lying across the pommel of the saddle, its muzzle within six inches of his person. Look which way he will, and those piercing orbs seem to be gazing him in the face. Never truly courageous, he now trembles like an aspen.

Every moment he expects will be his last. But suddenly a horseman is heard approaching. Some one is coming, and he will be saved. Hope—nay, despair! It precipitates the crisis. He sees the fatal weapon raised; he reels in his seat; he utters a sharp cry, and falls to the earth. His horse gallops madly on. The rider rapidly approaches. A laugh—a shot—a shriek—the clattering of another fleeing horse—and all is blank!

CHAPTER XXII.

ROGUES IN COUNCIL.

NIGHT, with all its solitude and gloom, still hangs over Chesterville. The great round moon, now nearing the zenith, lights up the earth with a somber brightness. No sound breaks the stillness. All nature is in repose.

Around the Prairie Home, where but a few short hours before occurred the tragedy which we have already narrated, there seems now nothing of life. No light glimmers from within, none of its inmates stirring. But, in spite of all this, two men are in the bar-room—two men, alone in the moonlight, sitting near together, consulting in hurried whispers.

"For God's sake, Tom, what'd you see?"

They are the first words that have been spoken aloud, and the answer comes in the same tone:

"What I pray to God I may never, never see again."

When we see that the first speaker wears a dark mask, we know it is Black Wayne, the outlawed desperado, the terror of Shelby county. By his voice, we judge, yet can hardly realize, that the other is our old friend, Orman Burley, keeper of the Prairie Home.

"But, Tom, your hair is snow-white, and you look ten years older than you did at sunset."

"I know it! I know it!" gasps the one addressed as Tom. By the moonlight we can see that his hair is *really* white. He can't be Orman Burley, for his was jet-black only a few hours ago.

"It was fearful! It was fearful!" he continues. "I saw him! and as true as you live, Dick Morgan, I never expected to get back here again."

"Well," said the other, after a pause, "the line grows shorter and shorter; the circle smaller and smaller. There are only Ralph and you and me."

"And my turn comes next. I feel it, I know it," groans Tom.

"Come, come, Tom Hanson, brace up and be a man. This is no time for sniveling."

"Don't blame me, Dick; don't blame me. But that cursed Red River affair has ruined us. Oh, God, why did we ever do it!"

"Fool!" exclaims the other, angrily, "cease your prating. You forget that we are men—bold, determined men! Why need we fear? Have we not the chance to escape, if we will?"

"For one, defy the whole of Chesterville, as far as that is concerned."

"But what do you propose, Dick? We have got to act at once, or it will be too late. Oh, I cannot help shuddering now as I think of that fearful demon!"

"What do I propose? Why, to get out of this as quick as possible."

"But my property? You must remember I cannot take this with me. And our gold?"

"Property be hanged! Do you weigh it beside your life? But this is no time to talk of that."

"Then we must flee again, wandering outcasts! But if I escape this, you will find me, henceforth, a different man."

"You can do as you please in the future; that is immaterial to me. But I warn you, if you go toward the States, don't stop this side of the Mississippi."

"Never fear for that, Dick. But hadn't we better keep together?"

"Why so? Each man for himself in times like this. It will be better for us to separate, though we part to never meet again."

"I suppose you are right, Dick; but somehow, my courage is all gone."

"Brace up, Tom! brace up! We shall soon be out of this, safe and sound."

"I wish I could think so," the other said, sadly.

"Your chance is as good as mine, and mine is as good as any," replies his companion, encouragingly. "Mark my word, I shall escape; and I see no earthly reason why you shouldn't. But it is time we were moving. While all is quiet, we must away. I agreed to meet the boys at the chaparral, and it is time I was there."

"Then you are going to have an escort to protect you?" asks the other, almost reproachfully.

"An escort?" laughs the other; "no, unless you consider a woman such. But Bessie Raymun is going with me."

"Bessie Raymun going with you!" echoes Tom, incredulously.

The outlaw laughs.

"But has she consented?"

Again the masked man laughs.

"Do you think I would stop for that? No. But the boys'll have her ready for me."

"Then you are going to take her. But why is it you must always have a woman mixed up in your affairs? She will be a hindrance in your flight. And remember, too, colonel, this is the third time. Beware."

"Though it costs me my life, I will never leave Chesterville without taking her with me. There is one who shall never have her to gloat over in triumph."

"Well, colonel, do as you please; but as for me, I'll have no woman to bother with."

"All right," assents the outlaw. "Come! I suppose you will take your horse. I shall take the one belonging to Curt Dash. Ha! won't the Regulator be mad when he misses it?" And once more the bandit laughs, as if the thought is humorous.

Silently the twain seek the door, and as silently glide out into the night. Under the silvery beams of the clear full moon, it is nearly as light as day. Swiftly they make for the stable, adjoining the "Home." But, suddenly, a low, discordant laugh checks them in their course.

Good Heaven! the very fiend from whom they are hoping to escape, the insatiable avenger who is hunting them to death, stands in their path.

Paralyzed with terror, they are powerless to move or speak; but with blanched faces and trembling limbs gaze upon the fearful being—their fate! Both know that one is doomed! and each feels he is the one.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

THE rider, as if enjoying the situation, slowly raises his fatal weapon! Then, the

piercing eyes select their victim, the livid scar presses the rifle-stock, the nervous fingers clutch the trigger, and a sharp report tells the rest.

A mocking laugh, and the demon is gone.

"Thank God! I have escaped once more!" exclaims the outlaw. "But, I would not undergo that again for worlds. Still I must not forget that he is close on my track! He is on the right trail now! Ralph and I are alone! But before the rising of to-morrow's sun, we will be leagues and leagues from here! In a foreign land beyond the ocean, we shall be safe, safe."

As soon as possible the outlaw leads from the stable Curt Dash's powerful dark-bay gelding, the fleetest horse in all Shelby, save Vall Deckers' blood-bay, now worn with hard riding, and the roan steed of the phantom Dead Duelist.

"Good-by, Prairie Home!" he murmurs, as he springs into the saddle. "Good-by, Chesterville! good-by, forever! Though my stay has been brief, and filled with painful experiences, I hate to leave you. But with me goes your fairest light, and, perhaps, your darkest shadow."

The bandit rides away, his keen vision glancing in every direction, fearing, he hardly knows what.

Soon he pauses near the edge of the chaparral, but not a single living object is to be seen—not a sound is heard.

"I must be too late," he mutters. "They have certainly come, ere this. Ha! a rifle-shot! Another! and another! By heavens! something is wrong! The boys are in trouble!"

Shouts and shrieks are heard. They come from the direction of Col. Raymun's hacienda.

Without hesitation, the outlaw gallops madly on toward the hue and cry of battle.

That the reader may better understand the situation, we beg permission to go back into the past to the time when the scene in our last chapter was occurring. Then, a party of men riding from the west paused by the edge of Chester chaparral. A man stealing through the tangled brush growth saw them as they drew rein. The horsemen were Black Wayne's outlaws; the other, Gil Rey.

"Egad! that's some deviltry afoot!" soliloquized the Regulator. Then, he cautiously crept forward near enough to hear some remarks, which told him their business and destination.

Soon he was hurrying to the settlement, and rallying the Rangers from their homes.

Outside the grove in front of Colonel Raymun's hacienda the foes met.

As the outlaw leader nears the place already specified he finds that his worst fears are realized. His followers attempting the forcible abduction of Bessie Raymun have brought the Regulators and it seems the whole of Chesterville down upon them. Everywhere the conflict seems raging.

"This is a pretty go!" he hisses between his clenched teeth. "I have a mind to let the fools fight it out themselves. They are nothing to me now! But stay! I must have her!"

With the words, he rides on a few rods, and reaches the border of the grove. Then, almost undecided which way to turn he slackens the pace of his horse to a walk. Under the shade of the trees, it is quite dark—so dark that he does not see the form of a man crouching near the trunk of a tree but a few feet distant, as if waiting his coming.

"By heavens! the boys have got their hands full! If I would get her, I must work ere it is too late!" he cries, striking his rowels deep into the sides of his spirited animal.

A snort of terror, and the high-mettled steed bounds forward; when, suddenly, a grasp upon the bridle almost hurls the horse back upon his haunches.

Quick as lightning almost, the assailant draws a pistol, and leveling it at the other, fires. But by a sudden movement of his head, the horse receives the fatal charge instead of its rider; and, with a shrill cry of pain, falls forward, in the throes of death.

Dexterously freeing his feet from the stirrups, the masked outlaw springs to the earth unhurt. Then the two men close in fierce, deadly combat, each knowing his life is at stake.

The two men are evenly matched; so evenly in fact that it seems for a time as if neither will succumb. To and fro, back and forth, they struggle in the darkness. Once we saw the outlaw at a disadvantage, but now he has gained more than he had lost; he is above! he is about dealing the fatal blow when he is hurled back. A quick blow follows, and with quivering limbs, a man falls prone upon the ground; and in a moment the victor staggers to his feet. We recognize Curt Dash, the Regulator chief.

Hearing some one passing, just as he regains his feet, Curt hails him; and a moment later half a dozen Regulators have gathered around the place.

"What's the trouble, cap'en?" asks the foremost, none other than Gil Rey. "You look about bu'sted!"

"Nothing, Gil," answers the chief; "only I have just had a tussle with the masked outlaw, and he came near getting the best of me."

"Had a scrimmage with Black Wayne! What! thet him?" cries the Regulator, as he catches sight of the outlaw's prostrate form.

"Yes; but I do not think he is dead, and you had better secure him before he recovers."

"I reckon so, too, cap'en. But fust, I'm goin' to take the old chap's vail off. I'm mighty curious to know how he looks."

Suiting the action to his words, the mountaineer tears off the outlaw's mask, when the surprised crowd gaze upon the white, upturned face of Vall Deckers!

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE CHIEF VICTIM OF ALL.

"It is as I have long thought—Vall Deckers, the Regulator, and Black Wayne, the masked outlaw, are one and the same person."

It was Colonel Raymun who uttered the speech, as he joined the excited group.

"I, too, have long expected it," supplements Curt Dash; but having no proof dared not give it utterance.

"What is it? Who is it?" cries a voice from the rear of the group.

Some one answers—

"'Tis Brad Wayne, the masked outlaw."

"Lynch him!"

"Shoot him!"

"Rope him!"

These are the cries taken up by the excited crowd, as they realize that their dreaded foe, the outlaw leader of Shelby county, is at last in their power. In their wild excitement, none think or care that he is a human being; but one and all demand the justice, which has been so long deferred.

As if realizing his peril, the bandit suddenly shows signs of returning consciousness, and soon rallies, starting half-way to his feet, with a scared, haggard look. It is with the greatest difficulty that Curt Dash, aided by Colonel Raymun and Gil Rey, can keep the infuriated mob from tearing him limb from limb.

"Back there, men!" commands the Regulator chief; "justice shall be done at the proper time."

Awed by their leader's voice, the Ranger's shrink back, and the outlaw breathes more freely.

"Where is Colonel Raymun?"

The question comes in a quick, abrupt way from a man who had joined the group.

"His daughter cannot be found! She is gone!"

"Bessie gone!" cries the father, in an anxious, agonizing tone.

The outlaws had been beaten, and, all had supposed, completely routed before they had done any harm. Three of their number had been slain, and the others had fled, as Gil Rey said, "like mountain sheep." But they had accomplished their object, though it was learned only too late.

"The outlaws have doubtless abducted her," Curt at last said. "But cheer up, colonel; we will rescue her before she comes to harm; I will stake my life for that."

"Thank you, Captain Dash, for the comfort your words give me. Do it, and you shall never regret the trouble."

"I can never rest until it is done; and, what is more, I will not!"

The colonel, nearly overcome with emotion, grasps the hardy Ranger's hand. Though overshadowed by a heart sorrow, it is the happiest moment Curt Dash has ever known in all his checkered life.

"Come, boys,"—turning to the Regulators—"I will help you take the outlaw to the Prairie Home; then I must leave you."

"Be careful of yourself, captain, be careful. I know you will not spare a single effort in your attempt to rescue her. God grant you success."

"Good-night, colonel; when I meet you again it will be to restore your daughter."

Soon the Regulators, with their prisoner in charge, are on their way to the Prairie Home.

Passing out from the grove, our party have not progressed far, when they are suddenly brought to a stand-still by the rapid approach of a horseman. Then the Dead Duelist, or whatever he is, rides down upon them. Always startled by his appearance, they are no less so now. But as he comes without menacing, goes without molesting, they quickly recover their self-possession, and continue on.

"God grant we may yet solve that mystery," exclaims Curt, as the strange rider disappears.

Every mind in the party echoes the words.

The Prairie Home, selected as the most fitting place to keep the prisoner, is soon reached.

In response to their summons at the door, silence alone answers.

Where is Burley? is the question formed upon every pair of lips; but before it finds utterance, the body of the Dead Duelist's victim is seen lying a short distance off.

No need to inquire more for Orman Burley.

In silence they turn from their lifeless friend, and quickly force an entrance into the building.

"Well, boys," says Curt, "I must leave you now. Don't let the outlaw escape you; but give him what he deserves at sunrise. Don't delay longer. It would be better, perhaps, were it done now, at once."

"Hold on, cap'en," cries Gil Rey, "don't go alone. Some of us can be spared, who'd be right glad to go with you."

"Thank you; but I am impatient to be off. You can come as soon as you choose after taking care of yonder brute. If I don't return before, meet me at the Black Gulch two hours after sunrise."

Without another word, the Regulator chief hurries to the stable, leads out Vall Deckers' blood-bay, mounts him, and rides away for the Red Lands, heading across Chester plain.

"The cap'en's gone clean crazy 'bout Miss Bessie," ejaculates Gil. "Jess soon's we rope this cuss, we must foller him. Mighty afeerd he'll run inter trouble. He hain't hisself."

To a good portion of Chesterville sleep is a stranger to-night, and the minutes drag away like hours, save to the outlaw under strong guard at the Prairie Home, awaiting his doom, sullen and silent.

Curt Dash has been gone scarcely twenty minutes, when a horse gallops madly up to the Prairie Home. All flecked with foam, and panting for breath, 'tis Deckers' blood-bay.

Like wildfire it spreads, but nothing can be found of its rider, the Regulator chief.

Two hours later, or just as the first rays of daylight are falling upon Shelby, Colonel Raymun and Gil Rey, passing out of the growth northeast of the chaparral, see a lot of dark objects rising and falling from one particular spot on the plain. Half realizing what they are to find, the twain hurry to the place; and as they near it, a flock of vultures, with angry screeches, fly away from the form of a man, already disfigured by their filthy beaks.

"My God! 'tis Curt Dash!" cries Colonel Raymun, first to recognize the body of the Regulator chief. He had been shot, and the livid hue of the wound tells by a copper bullet.

"Terrible! terrible!" almost groans the colonel. "What next?"

Well may Colonel Raymun ask the question. Nine of Chesterville's sturdiest men have gone down in this same mysterious way, two others are on the brink, and still two more are missing, with fates unknown, and another has been found a traitor, an outlaw and a murderer. His own child, too, is in the clutches of unprincipled foes. This is the darkest hour Chesterville ever knew. May it be that which precedes the dawn.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE DELAYED EXECUTION.

BLACK WAYNE is a captive at the Prairie Home.

Around the building in which the outlaw is confined a great crowd has centered. A crowd not only anxious and excited, but furious.

True Bill, standing by his wounded friend, who had been removed from the noise and turmoil of the tavern to his home, hears the intelligence with an almost fiendish satisfaction. Between the sturdy Regulator and his companion there exists a tie far stronger than the common bond of friendship, uniting man and man.

"D'ye hyar thet, Rock, me boy? They've got ther varmint, and he's got ter suffer. Reckon I'll go up an' see ther fun, ef ye hev no objection."

Rock is far too low to even notice his friend's speech.

"They say it is Vall Deckers who is Black Wayne," remarks a companion-watcher.

"Vall Deckers Black Wayne?" cries Bill, in surprise; "thet can't be so. It am impossible."

"But he is," persists the other.

"Wal, I'm dead beat! Howsumever, thet h'ists the mystery a leetle. He being one of the outlaws, of course we c'u'dn't do nothin'. Sh'u'dn't s'posed he'd hev handled Rock so, though. But to speak the truth, I never did think much o' thet Deckers."

A moment later Bill is on his way to join the clamorous gathering.

"Bring the outlaw out! bring him out! We want to see him!" cries one of the mad throng.

"Yes! yes!" comes the chorus.

A dozen stalwart men rush forward for that purpose.

"Hold!" commands Gil Rey, standing in the doorway, holding his rifle in his hands, with unwavering determination; "the first man who tries to enter here, dies! Cap'en Dash said he should swing at sunrise, and swing then he shall! But I say thet he shan't be touched afore; and to do it ye must walk over my dead body!"

"Shoot 'em both!"

"Lynch 'em!"

"Rope 'em!"

Such are the cries taken up by the infuriated mob, till it seems as if they will tear the building to the earth, to accomplish their purpose.

But, once Gil Rey has made up his mind, all Shelby cannot move him. The crowd know this, and no one seems to be willing to risk his life as the first mover in the attempt.

"What do you mean, Gil?" cries True Bill, who has succeeded in gaining the mountaineer's side. "Why don't you let 'em take the varmint out, an' give him what he deserves?"

"Time enough, Bill. Cap'en Dash said rope him at sunrise; an' then I'll be one to help do it."

"But why wait till then? They are getting onpatient; an' 'sides, we warnt ter go on ther trail. Ye are a fool, Gil Rey! an' look out ye don't git rubbed out fur this."

Without seeming to notice the insolent speech—almost threat—of his quondam friend and companion, the mountaineer replies:

"I don't care ef Vall Deckers is the meanest outlaw in all Texas; he saved my life yester-

day, an' I hain't fergot it yet. He's merely asked to live to see the sun rise once more, an' he shall, or Gilman Reynolds don't!"

"Ye promised him thet, Gil?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm with ye."

Without another word, Bill takes a position by the side of Gil Rey, and the two face the crowd in defiance, though it seems like facing death. But the mob, as if awed by this cool and determined bravery, gradually becomes less furious. It is true a couple of shots can clear the way for their purpose; but, thank God, they have not quite come to that yet.

Still, the abatement proves but a lull. Others continually joining add fuel to the flames; and soon the clamor bursts forth again, with increased fury.

Inside the building, the prisoner trembles as he hears the furious outcry. He realizes that there is no hope! Even if the crowd is stayed until sunrise, it will be but a few minutes now.

"Can't you make any terms with them?" he asks of Gil.

"No!" comes in reply; "they are like mad bufflers."

"Tell them I want a moment's talk with you. Then, they can do their worst."

A shout of derision is the only answer to the request.

"The sun is rising!"

With the cry the mad horde rush for the door.

Gil Rey has kept his word. But, a moment later, he is swept aside, and the outlaw is dragged out, like a beast to its slaughter.

Now follows one of those scenes which have so stained the record of our American Border. But here we must make due allowance; and when we consider the character of the man they are dealing with, and when we realize what he has done against them and theirs, let us not judge. Perhaps we should have acted likewise.

Without delay the doomed man is carried beneath the live-oak. Then a rope is noosed around his neck. There has been no thought of giving him a trial, for none seemed needed; and not even giving him the chance to say a single intelligible word, the excited crowd rush the terrible proceedings. The rope is thrown over a limb of sufficient height, and willing hands seize it, ready for the signal to swing their victim into eternity.

With a despairing look, the outlaw turns upon the crowd, and seems about to speak, when the fatal word is given, and the cord straightens. But suddenly a wild, unearthly laugh sends a thrill of terror through the throng, and the men holding the rope, as if paralyzed, pause. *It came from the grave of the Dead Duelist!* Soon the hoof-strokes of a horse are heard approaching—coming nearer and nearer, and still no horseman is in sight! Nothing but empty space meets their gaze.

Near to the crowd the horseman seems to stop. Then another laugh and the *spang* of a rifle breaks upon the air, quickly followed by a sharp, piercing cry, and then the hoof-strokes seem receding—going further and further away, till they finally near the solitary grave by the chaparral, when they instantly cease.

Awhile the crowd is literally stupefied. The outlaw awaiting his doom is now the most self-possessed man under the live-oak.

The people have nearly recovered from their shock, and are about to turn to finish the execution, when again, as if fate seemed bent on delaying the deed, hoof-strokes are heard; and then a horseman is seen coming over the plain near upon them. This is no phantom. The horse bears a double burden. One is a woman, quickly recognized as Bessie Raymun. The other is a man, and—it can't be!—if we had not seen him lying cold and stark on Chester plain scarcely thirty minutes since, *we would affirm that it is Curt Dash!*

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE DEAD DEAD AT LAST!

SPELLBOUND the anxious crowd watches the approaching riders as they rapidly near them. No one thinks now of the outlaw; and thus he is permitted an unexpected reprieve. The woman is certainly Bessie Raymun; and though it brings joy to relatives and friends, it is hushed by the appearance of the other. In every look and bearing the man is the exact prototype of their friend, Curt Dash, now no more. Has the Regulator chief come back from the grave?

"It is Curt Dash, or I'm a trapped beaver!" exclaims Gil Rey.

"It is Curt Dash!" cries the crowd.

There is no disputing the fact.

"A pleasant morning to all!" greets the Regulator chief, with a smiling countenance.

In the scene which follows eager friends and relatives press around the returned couple, in unforgotten joy.

"Thank God! thank God, Bessie! you have been spared to return unharmed!" cries the nearly overjoyed father, as he presses his daughter to his breast.

"Yes, father; through the bravery of Captain Dash."

"Right, Bessie!" and the colonel turns to grasp the Regulator's hand.

"Ah, Colonel Raymun, you see that I have kept my word," says Curt, as the other holds his hand.

"Most nobly, Captain Dash, most nobly!" cries the colonel enthusiastically; "but, explain to me one thing, captain: how in the named of Heaven do I behold you here in flesh and blood, when I saw you less than an hour ago lying on Chester plain, dead?"

"Beg pardon, colonel, but I do not understand you. You speak in riddles."

Then in a few, hurried words the colonel tells him what has transpired—how they had found a lifeless body on the plain, food for vultures, and positively identified it as his.

"There is some mistake," replies Curt as the other finishes; "of course it could not have been me."

"Then, who was it?"

"I must plead ignorance," answers Curt; "having never seen my counterpart, I am in the dark as to his identification."

"A truce to this!" exclaims Colonel Raymun. "Let's have the captain's story; perhaps that will give some explanation."

"I assure you I can throw no light on the mystery," declares Curt; "besides, I have but a little to tell," he adds modestly.

Seeing that his story is really desired, however, the Regulator chief narrates it as follows:

"I had not gone far, after leaving the Prairie Home, before the horse which I had taken, Deckers' bay, as my own had been taken by the outlaw, began to grow uneasy and almost refused to advance, snorting, rearing, plunging furiously, so that it was with the greatest difficulty I could manage him at all.

"At last, thinking something must be wrong about his bit, I dismounted, to arrange it more satisfactorily, and if possible to remove the trouble, when, with a sudden jerk, he freed his head, and wheeling, galloped madly back, leaving me afoot on the plain.

"Knowing it would be useless to continue on foot, I was coming back, when suddenly, as if a God-send, I saw a stray horse on the prairie not far away. He was all saddled and bridled, and with but little trouble I succeeded in catching him. This is the same one, and I am inclined to think he had been ridden by the man whose body you thought was mine.

"Once more mounted, I turned toward the Red Lands, and nothing interrupted my course again until I neared the border, when, as if arising from the earth, the Dead Duelist stood before me.

"My first thought upon beholding the apparition, was to turn and flee; but I saw that he meant to shoot me, and I knew I could not escape by flight. Suddenly a thought flashed

through my mind, and as quickly as possible I raised my rifle, and, aiming directly at his head, instead of his body as we have always done before, fired, just before he brought his weapon to a level.

"Boys, after having seen that demon baffle us so many times, you can judge of my surprise and satisfaction, when I saw him drop his long rifle undischarged, and fall from his roan, dead!"

At this juncture, the hushed stillness which has fallen upon the crowd, is suddenly broken by a prolonged shout of triumph, repeated again and again, till every throat seems to echo the joyful cry.

"This," continues Curt, as soon as he can make himself heard, "proves that he was mortal; and now I am positive he was one of Black Wayne's outlaws.

"Soon after, I ran upon a couple of the outlaws fleeing with Miss Raymun; and by a sudden attack, I succeeded in rescuing her, though both of the desperadoes escaped."

No one in all the crowd has been a more attentive listener to the Regulator's story than the doomed outlaw under the live-oak; and as Curt mentions the shooting of the mysterious rider, a deathly pallor overspreads his features, and an involuntary cry escapes his lips.

"Come, men!" cries the captain, as the storm of applause which succeeds his narrative dies away; "I am going to accompany Colonel Raymun and his daughter to their home, so finish your work; and then Chesterville will indeed be free. All is right that ends well."

Again the men turn to their prisoner, and once more eager, willing hands seize the rope.

"This for Rock Randel and Mark Waring!" cries True Bill, as with others he grasps the fatal cord.

A shrill, piercing cry suddenly splits the air, almost causing the executioners to pause. Bessie Raymun, who has refused to leave the place with her father, uttered the scream, as if terrified at the fearful proceedings.

"Hold!" a clear, ringing voice commands, "there is a horseman coming."

Who made the declaration none know; but as if by magic, the gaze of all is turned to the west, when a horseman is seen coming down by the chaparral growth.

"By heavens!" cries Curt Dash, "it is the outlaws coming to rescue their leader! Quick, for your lives, men! Swing the wretch, and prepare for a defense!"

"But look, Captain Dash!" almost shrieks Bessie; "he is waving a signal!"

"Only a ruse," cries the Regulator chief. "Do your work, men, ere it is too late."

No need to repeat the injunction of haste, as the men at the rope are not sluggards. Ere the words reach their ears, their vise-like grip is upon the cord with fatal certainty; and, as it receives their strength, the outlaw, with a spasmodic groan, feels the noose tighten. He tries to speak, but a sickening, strangling sensation chokes his utterance, as he feels himself drawn into mid-air.

But at this critical moment, a light form bursts through the crowd, and Bessie Raymun, flushed with excitement, reaches the doomed man's side; and hastily cocking a revolver, just snatched from Curt Dash's belt, she levels it full at the foremost of the half-dozen men holding the rope, exclaiming, in a clear, sharp voice:

"Hold there! or you die!"

A moment, the furious mob is held at bay by a woman's heroism.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MYSTERY UPON MYSTERY.

THE men at the rope unconsciously relax their hold, and the outlaw falls back against the tree, his mind bewildered, hardly realizing the turn affairs have taken. With flashing eye, the heroic girl holds in abatement the fury of the raging throng. There is no mistaking her determination; but calm and stern as she is brave and beautiful, the hot-headed mob is

defied, yet swayed by the charm of her very audacity. But quickly the spell is broken.

"Fools!" fairly shrieks Curt Dash, "will you be balked by a woman?"

Enraged by the taunt, the men, forgetting everything in their furious haste, hesitate no longer. Colonel Raymun is rushing through the crowd to rescue his daughter from her danger. A crisis is imminent, when, like a shot, the towering form of Gil Rey breaks from the surging mass, and, with a bound, he is under the giant oak; when his long rifle, instantly sweeping the circle of anxious spectators, is brought to bear upon the half-dozen men assuming the duties of hangmen.

"Quit thet, ye cusses, afore I lay ye out. I reckon old Gil Rey don't stand round an' see a gal show sich spunk es thet and not help her out. 'Sides, thar is but one horseman comin', an' he is slingin' a truce. It ar' jess our dooty to wait an' see what ther chap wants. It can't do enny hurt, ef it don't do enny good. So what the gal said I will back up. Still, right whar ye are, fer we are goin' ter wait. Keep up yer narves, Miss Bessie. I reckon we are enough fer the hull caboodle."

At last!

The steely glitter of his eyes, and his demeanor tell that Gil Rey is not in a mood to be trifled with.

"What means this?" cries Curt Dash, spurring forward through the crowd.

"I reckon it means biz'ness, cap'en," replies the mountaineer, coolly facing his leader.

"But consider what you are doing, Gil. This is no time for fooling. The men have a stern duty to perform, and it ill behooves you to interfere. You are periling your own life merely to prolong for a few minutes that of a cursed outlawed felon."

The prisoner, who has somewhat recovered from his shock, turns toward the Regulator chief as if intending to speak; but his gaze wanders from his foe to the horseman coming over the plain, when, suddenly, his countenance is radiant with joy, and a murmured "Thank God!" escapes his lips.

"I reckon this coon hain't fooling, but he's in dead 'arnest; jess standin' up fer the right. I'm thinkin' thar ar' some other chaps in danger, 'sides myself. Leastway, thar am ef they don't mind the word. I tell yer, cap'en, I'm goin' to stand by the gal whether she's right or wrong, ef I git rubbed out fer it."

"Don't blame me, then, if you get yourself into trouble. Here, some of—"

Glancing out upon the prairie, Curt suddenly sees the fast-approaching rider. A moment he watches him with intense interest; and then every bit of color leaves his face, and he almost falls from his saddle, exclaiming simply in an unnatural voice:

"Good God!"

Almost startled by the captain's sudden and mysterious actions, the crowd, which has been watching the scene under the oak, looks out upon the plain, upon the oncoming horseman.

"Good heavens! it can't be! it can't be!" exclaims Curt.

'Tis only a horseman, sweeping like the wind over Chester plain. Only a horseman! yet enough to make the brave Regulator chief tremble and turn pale! enough to startle all Shelby! *It is the Dead Duelist!*

"It is he! it is he!" gasps Curt. "I must out of this, or I am lost! lost!" Then, with a wild, despairing look, he tries to force his way through the amazed crowd. But none appear to notice him, and slowly they turn away from him to pass; so slowly that it seems as if he will never get beyond the throng which hems him in upon every side.

How different the approach of the other. As if life and death are in the balance the fleet-footed roan is bearing his master on. Erect in his seat, looking like a wild centaur, the strange rider presses him on faster and faster, till, with flowing mane and streaming tail, he almost seems to fly. Only an instant, with unchecked speed the crowd is reached; then, as the amazed spectators spring aside, the gallant steed, all flecked with foam, and

panting for breath, stops beneath the old live-oak.

"Thank God! I am not too late."

They are the first words the Phantom Horseman has ever been known to utter.

As his gleaming eyes wander over the crowd, they rest upon Curt Dash, just leaving the outer edge. Quick as lightning he raises that fatal weapon.

"Hold there, Len Moore! Another step and I will shoot you as I would a dog!"

The Regulator has cleared his course; he will risk a shot from his mysterious foe before he will turn at bay. Safe from that he can escape. So, plunging the rowels into his horse, he dashes forward. But, only for an instant, when he comes face to face with Mark Waring!

"Stand, Len Moore! Your race is run! your game is up."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"BEHOLD THE MASKED OUTLAW!"

SUDDENLY a man has sprung into the Regulator chief's path, and at the muzzle of a rifle he is told—

"Stand, Len Moore! Your race is run! your game is up!"

With a cry of mingled rage and despair Curt Dash is compelled to stay his flight. Baffled at this very moment of seeming success, his rage is succeeded by amazement.

"For God's sake! are you Mark Waring, or his ghost?"

"Ha, Len Moore! you thought I was dead—died of terror and starvation in that fearful dungeon. But, thank Heaven! I was allowed to escape the awful doom to which you had consigned me, and hope to live to see you meet the fate your crime-stained career demands."

Curt Dash seems stupefied; the crowd is astounded. What does it all mean?

"There is some fearful mistake," cries Curt, quickly recovering, "or you are trying to frighten me."

"There is no mistake, as you will find to your sorrow. At last you are caught in your own toils. Come; you are wanted under the oak."

"You can shoot me if you dare, Mark Waring! but I deny your right to command me, Rangers!" he continues, turning to the crowd, "will you stand idly by and see your leader abused?"

In answer, not a move! not a word!

"Men of Chesterville," shouts Mark, "I denounce this man, whom you have heretofore considered a friend; he is a traitor and an outlaw; behold in him Brad Wayne, the masked outlaw!"

"Liar!" fairly hisses Curt.

"I do not ask you to take my word for this," continues Waring, without heeding the other's interruption, though closely watching his movements, "but give him a trial, and if he is not what I have said, let him prove it; if he is, let him suffer, and not the innocent man he has caused you to drag to the slaughter."

The appeal has an effect.

"Trap him!" cries a voice from the crowd.

"Never!" cries Curt, fiercely, and in his desperation, he thinks to escape. But in the twinkling of an eye a dozen men hurl themselves upon him, and after a severe struggle he is a prisoner, bound hand and foot, and borne beneath the tree.

"This can't be possible!" exclaims Colonel Raymun, the most astonished man in the crowd. "Mark Waring, you are crazy!"

"Excuse me, colonel," replies Mark, respectfully, "but I have proof of what I say. Besides, do not his own actions condemn him?"

The colonel vouchsafes no reply. He, like the crowd, knows not what to think or say.

"Good Heaven! had you got to that?" cries Mark, as for the first time he notices the situation of Vall Deckers. Then, without another word, he frees the Regulator.

A murmur from the crowd, only, whether of assent or not none can tell.

"Wagh!" exclaims Gil Rey, who has watched the scene with eager, curious gaze, "I

reckon, Mark, ye w'u'dn't hed thet privilege if it hedn't bin fer the gal hyar."

"You are right, Gil; and to you I owe a debt of gratitude." Then, without heeding the assembly surrounding him, Vall turns to the heroic girl, who has dared and done so much for him, and seizing her hands, he exclaims:

"Oh, Miss Raymun—Bessie! had it not been for you, my noble—"

"Vall, oh, Vall! what did it all mean? You are not an outlaw!" and she falls into his outstretched arms.

"No, thank God, no! It was a terrible ordeal, but I am safe now."

Wonder upon wonder! when will mystery cease? The spectators are more amazed than ever; but now, save Curt Dash alone, there is not a dry eye in the throng. Even the stern and pitiless horseman, who has watched the foregoing events in silence, is moved with emotion. All seem to realize that there has been some dreadful mistake.

"Come, come, daughter!" cries Colonel Raymun, as soon as he recovers enough to speak, "you will please go with me."

"No, no, father! not till I see the end of this."

"Girl! what do you mean? Will you bring dishonor upon yourself and parents by associating with an outlaw and desperado?"

Plainly, the colonel is getting excited.

"Father! how dare you? Mr. Deckers is a gentleman. But even if he is Brad Wayne, the outlaw, I would not undo what I have done, for I love him! I love him!"

Who can say this would have been better unpoken? Certainly not Vall Deckers.

"Pardon me, Colonel Raymun," speaks up the Regulator quickly, "but wait a few moments before you judge. Perhaps I am not what you think. It is time the veil was lifted, is it not, Mr. Dare?" he asks, turning to the strange horseman.

"Yes, yes, Noble; the time has come. Our work is nearly done. But you or Mark must give the explanations. I cannot go over those scenes again; besides, I do not feel like myself to-day. It has all been too much for me."

"You are the one to do it, Vall," adds Mark. "Take it from beginning to end."

"If you can explain all this mystery, Vall Deckers," supplements the colonel, "do it at once. I am impatient to know what it all means."

"Spot ther trail," chimes in Gil Rey.

"The story! The story!" chorus the others.

CHAPTER XXIX.

VALL DECKERS' STORY.

"GENTLEMEN of Chesterville," begins Vall, "our friend, Mr. Waring, made a startling assertion when he said that Curtis Dash was Brad Wayne the outlaw leader we have so long dreaded; still it is to prove not only this but other crimes of which he is guilty, and to show him to you in his true character, that I am about to relate the following, hoping you will bear patiently with me to the end of the sad, terrible history:

Four years ago I could have shown you in the state of Louisiana as happy a home as the sun ever shone upon. A father, mother, daughter and son completed the family circle, though the last was then away at college.

Suddenly a wolf entered the fold. A man, or rather a fiend in human shape, with flattering address, stole away the daughter's girlish heart. He told of the wealth and luxury he would bring her, of the happiness that would be theirs; and beguiled by the serpent's fascination, she, knowing her parents would object to the union, consented to flee with him.

"What a fearful mistake! Soon he, as all other wretches of his stamp do, tired of her; and feeling the gulf widening between them, in her desperation she besought him by their holy marriage to respect and protect her. Then, in a few harsh, scornful words he told her that marriage was all a sham, all a mockery!

"Oh, God! the misery that followed! Returning from college, where he had graduated with high honor, light-hearted, justly proud in carrying to his loved ones the achievements he had won, and expecting a glad welcome, he reached home—alas! barely in season to attend his parents' funeral—his father and mother, whose gray heads had been brought down in sorrow to untimely graves by a daughter's dishonorable conduct. While she, innocently the cause of it all, was sleeping in a suicide's grave.

"Can you blame me, that son, if I renounced everything else of life, and vowed I would spend the remainder of my days, if necessary, to bring that villain to punishment?"

"Two years I spent in ceaseless wanderings before I found any trace of my man. Then, at a settlement on the Red river, I learned of one who I judged must be he. Here he was the leader of a gang of cutthroats known as Morgan's Band. But he had fled the country, and none knew where he had gone, though it was thought to the Taos Valley.

"Before leaving this place, however, I made the acquaintance of one who had as deep reasons to hate the now outlawed desperado as myself. This man had been active in trying to bring Morgan and his confederates to justice; and they, when compelled to seek safety in flight, sought vengeance upon their persecutor by surprising him, the very night of their departure, in his quiet home, burning his cabin, murdering his wife and child before his own eyes, and then hanging him to the nearest tree, till dead, they supposed. But at the moment they were finishing their terrible work, a brother of the dying woman, having learned of the bandits' nefarious intentions, was hurrying to warn his friends of danger, and reached the ill-fated place just as the devil's horde was leaving. He cut down the husband ere life was extinct; but the wife and child were beyond the scenes of this world.

"Suffering from two wounds received while trying to defend himself and family, both made by poisoned bullets—though why copper was used instead of lead is more than I know—one upon his face, and the other in his leg, causing the amputation of that limb, and snatched as he was from the very grasp of death, it was a long, long time before he recovered, and then only to be, in body and mind, a wreck of his former self.

"Perhaps I need not tell you that my friend here,"—pointing to the rider of the roan horse—"Mr. Albert Dare, is the sufferer to whom I refer; and Mark Waring is the brother of that foully murdered wife.

"Jointly, we three renewed the oath I had taken, including now not only Morgan, as my hated enemy then called himself, but his eleven followers.

"Time passed on, and it seemed like a fruitless mission. Mark, as you know, came to Chesterville, and settled here. In Taos, Mr. Dare found two of the outlaws, and ended their career of crime. But nothing could we find of him whom we most cared for, the leader of the gang.

"At last, in answer to the request of Mark, I came to this county. Judge of my surprise, when, soon after my arrival, I found myself face to face with the very same man for whom I was hunting. Mark had never known him, and he had never seen my friend or me, so that the recognition was wholly upon my part.

"My foe was your favorite, standing the highest of almost any one in Shelby county. I knew that an attempt of mine to expose him would be not only a failure, but dangerous.

"Mark and myself, undecided how to proceed, but still determined to make him suffer, went to Mr. Dare. In a short time, suddenly and unexpectedly to us, he made his appearance at the shooting-match, crazed with a spirit for vengeance. You know its result and the duel which followed. Then commenced the chain of mystery that has so puzzled you.

"Mark had seen but one or two, and I had never known any of Morgan's Band, as they were called, so of course we were unable to detect them, though they might be in the midst

of us. But when Mr. Dare came, he thought he recognized a part of them among us Rangers and Regulators. Later, we found for a fact, that not only Dick Morgan himself was among you, but that nine of his followers were here also. This was as startling to us then, as it must be to you now. Still, it was a more alarming discovery when we learned by continual spying and watching, that Leonard Moore, the base betrayer, or Dick Morgan, the border cutthroat, or Curt Dash, your favorite and leader, was Black Wayne, the masked outlaw! who, with his nine confederates, was linked with the desperadoes of the Red Lands!"

CHAPTER XXX.

LIFTING THE VAIL.

As Vall Deckers paused in his recital, an awed silence possesses the anxious crowd. Curt Dash, as we must persist in calling him, has been a quiet listener. No one can realize that he is the arch-demon the other has pictured him. Can it all be true?

"Well, gentlemen," Vall continues, "I know you are impatient for some explanation of the singular proceedings since the duel, so I will hasten to the end of my narrative.

"You doubtless think it strange to see before us the same person who was killed and buried in your own presence; and if I say there is really no mystery in this, you will discredit me; yet 'tis easily explained.

"The report of Mr. Dare's rifle, though it was not noticed by you in your excitement, told that the bullet had been extracted; and I have since found it a fact. Orman Burley did it at the instigation of his leader, while the stranger was his guest at the Prairie Home. Had it not been for that, Len Moore, or Curt Dash, or whatever he chooses to call himself, coward as he is, would not have dared to face his antagonist; and if he had he would not have lived to see this exposure. But as it was, Mr. Dare fell, and when Mark reached his side he really thought the unfortunate man was dead. Be it as it might, he had reasons for keeping others from him, which prompted him to use the expression he did—'*A man shot through the heart must be dead, of course*'—without committing himself, or really referring to the one of whom he was supposed to be speaking.

"Had your eyes watched him as closely as Mark's and mine did, you would have seen that he showed signs of returning consciousness, as the damp earth touched him. Lightly we let it down upon him, yet, if you had not left as you did, we should have been obliged to acknowledge our discovery. But, knowing it would be best to withhold it if possible, we impatiently waited for your departure, and you had barely turned before we were lifting our friend from the cold pit.

"Mr. Dare's wound, though it left him weak and faint from the loss of blood, was not at all dangerous; and after carefully dressing it, Mark and I filled up the grave, which you all supposed to contain his remains.

"In an old cabin below here, Mr. Dare staid the following fortnight, in which time he had nearly recovered. Then, Mark and myself finally consented to help him carry out his scheme of vengeance. Having no proof but our words, as I have already said, we could not hope to expose the league of nine, standing as they did, with any chance of success. Still the safety of our friends, and the prompting of our hatred, demanded that we should do something. Thus continually watching and hunting our foes, we still did all in our power for the protection of you and your families, though we found it more than was expected, and we partially failed.

"Recovering his horse for him, our friend commenced his part of the work the night of the intended marriage at Major Conrad's. Captain Kelley, Will Manners, in fact, all that have fallen by his hands, were a part of the Red Land outlaws.

"Knowing the risk he was running, I procured a breast-plate for Mr. Dare, which an-

swers for the ineffectual attempts that have been made to shoot him; and coming like one from the grave, with his wild appearance, and the thrilling events you have seen and heard, I do not wonder you have considered him a phantom. To a certain extent I am responsible for this deception. An accomplished ventriloquist, I have not hesitated to use that power when I deemed it could be satisfactorily done; and the warning given at the wedding, the sounds you have heard this morning, representing an invisible horseman, which were made merely to gain time,—in fact, all that you have heard and not seen, together with more that has been witnessed by the dead victims, were the result of that peculiar gift of mine. But, all the mystery and terror we have confined as much as possible to the doomed league.

"The first abduction was merely a farce, that Curt Dash could have the privilege of pretending to rescue her from the outlaws when he thought proper, hoping thus to gain her father's friendship, and win her hand. But Mark thwarted him there.

"Now you will ask how, if Curt Dash is the masked outlaw, both have been seen at the same time—two distinct persons. Len Moore had a bother, Ralph; he was one of Morgan's Band, and, also second in command of the robber-gang here. Thus he often wore the mask, and appeared as Black Wayne, though you have naturally supposed it always veiled one particular face. This Ralph was the abductor of Miss Conrad, and he shot her father—did it with a copper bullet, hoping, as I think, to throw it on the Dead Duelist, as you considered Mr. Dare. It was the body of that brother you found on the plain this morning, and mistook for our prisoner here.

"When I left my companions in the Red Lands it was to continue my search for Mark, and at last I found him in the bandits' deserted den, where Curt Dash,—here his pretended friend and leader, there in his true character as Black Wayne the robber and murderer,—had consigned him to die of starvation.

"I wish to say in behalf of Mr. Dare that his attempted shooting of our friend, Gil Rey, was the result of his mistaking him for another in the darkness. For his carelessness, he wishes to apologize.

"There, gentlemen, I hope the mystery is satisfactorily explained, and that you are no longer in doubt. As I look back over my conduct, I do not wonder you considered something wrong about me; and finally, when you found me with that mask on, which was placed upon my face after the desperate wearer himself had overcome me in a fight, that you should think I was the outlaw leader. Of course, I do not blame you for what you would have done had it not been for my noble, heroic friends; still it was a dreadful ordeal.

"God only knows how much Mr. Dare and myself have suffered from that infamous scoundrel. If you wish for more proof of what I have said, before taking your final action, go to Rock Randel, who was shot by this fiend's own hand, because the other had accidentally learned his secret."

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE OUTLAW'S CONFESSION AND FATE.

THE assembly absorbed in this singular story had not noticed Curt Dash for the few past minutes of its narration; then suddenly, it is seen he has succeeded in freeing his hands. He draws a pistol, which he had concealed upon his person. It flashes in the air! he presses its muzzle against his temple! but, ere he can discharge it, Gil Rey and half a dozen others seize him, and again he is overpowered, and the weapon wrested from him.

"Curse you!" he cries, "curse you! Everything is against me! It is all up! I have played a bold game, and played it well, but fate has been against me! Do your worst! I confess all. You can call me what you choose

now, but remember there has been a time when I led you! when you considered me your superior! Ha-ha-ha! how your eyes were blinded! But, oh God! what a fool I was to come back! Why could I not let well enough alone? When I left you this morning I never intended to return; but, with Miss Raymun, I was going to flee to a foreign land. Then I met my enemy, and killed him, as I supposed, when, thinking I was rid of the others, Mark and Vall, my path seemed clear. So pretending to rescue Miss Raymun from my friends I came back, with the resolution to be henceforth a better man—to try and live as others do. But it was all a mistake! As Waring told me in the cave, I was doomed! doomed!"

With that singular contradiction of human nature to persecute adversity, the man, who, but a few moments since was respected and honored by all, whose name was a power in itself, has now not a single friend in this tumultuous gathering.

"If it had not been for you, Vane Noble!" the doomed wretch continues; "but I will not complain. You have earned your triumph. My life has been a curse! I see it now! My crimes have been great. One by one I have seen my men fall around me, and knew my turn would come at last; still I hoped to escape. Before I die, Vane Noble, know that your sister, Adrian, still lives!"

"Do you mean this, Leonard Moore?" cries Vall, excitedly.

"On the word of a man expecting death. She was saved from drowning, but did not recover till her parents were no more. Then, in her sorrow she sought the seclusion of the St. Mary's convent."

"Is that all you have to say, Leonard Moore, before receiving your doom?"

"No, no! Oh, this is agony! No one to pity or care for me now! Thus does a life of crime end in eternal darkness! Can't you pity me, forgive me for what I did to you and yours, Vane Noble, Albert Dare?"

"As I expect my judgment in the great Hereafter, so may you find yours, Leonard Moore," replies Vall.

"Look to your God for mercy," answers the half-crazed Albert Dare; "it would be mockery for me to say the word."

Allow us to draw the veil over the scene which follows. * * * * Curt Dash, or rather Leonard Moore, with all his crimes, has gone to meet his Maker.

A few explanations and the web of mystery that has so long mantled Chesterville will be lifted forever.

The Phantom Rider as we already know, was the result of Vane Noble's (Vall Deckers no more) ventriloquism; and with the aid of that same power he was enabled to rescue Rock Randel from the outlaws' halter. Vane, also, made the last laugh, and fired the shot which came so near Curt Dash under the sycamore; on foot, he succeeded in escaping through the Black Gulch. His sham attempt to shoot the Dead Duelist's horse in the Red Lands was done by loading his rifle without any bullet. Thus in every scene which has seemed supernatural Vane Noble acted his part, and being peculiarly fitted for the part he played, he performed it well.

The blind trail which so puzzled Dandy Rock was simply a stratagem of Albert Dare's, to throw the outlaws off his track, for the strange avenger made his abode mostly in one of the caves in the Red Lands. Of course, what Hank Webber told, or any of the other outlaw Regulators, was false.

The sudden appearance of Mark to the crowd under the live-oak, was caused by his coming from back of the throng. His sufferings in that dismal cave can be better imagined than told.

It will be remembered that Curt Dash was not mentioned—and, if the excited crowd had only noticed it, was not seen—until after the shooting of Rock. He had escaped by the window, and coming in at the door joined the others in their fruitless efforts.

Of the combat in the grove, we know now it was Curt who wore the mask, and that *he*, for once, was too much for Vall, changing the covering from his face to that of his foe.

Thus we find that, as the outlaw himself said, "he had played a bold game and played it well, but fate had been against him." While we cannot uphold the three avengers in the course they took, yet when we think of the blasted hopes, the desolated homes, and the happy lives of loved ones so untimely ended, we will not judge them. But rather be it all a warning; and, ever remember, though they may possess the highest elements of manhood, those who follow the dark and crooked way of vice and crime, are surely destined to be sooner or later drawn to an inevitable doom.

With the rising of the sun above the gathering under the old oak that morning, a brighter day dawned for Chesterville.

Major Conrad soon recovered, and all was pleasant and happy at Conrad Mansion.

For a long time the life of Rock Randel hung upon a thread, but a strong constitution brought him out at last, and in time he fully recovered from the effects of the fearful wound he received at the hands of the outlaw.

Vane Noble effected the release of his sister from the convent, and she found a home at Colonel Raymun's.

Gilman Reynolds, old Gil Rey as he was familiarly called, again sought the pleasures and hardships of mountain life. But not till Chesterville had rung with the music of a grand double wedding, which united Vane Noble and Bessie Raymun, Mark Waring and Rose Conrad, for better or worse. Judging by the happy lives they ever afterward led, we think it must have been for the better.

Time, the alleviator of sorrow, and healer of all wounds, partially effaced from the mind of Albert Dare the sufferings he had experienced. He had a cheerful home with Mark, till he found a sympathizing friend and companion in the equally wronged and distressed Adrian Noble, when together the two finished the pathway of life.

True Bill still lived with Rock Randel. In all this happiness, the gallant roan and the noble bay were not forgotten; but, tenderly cared for, they lived many a year.

THE END.

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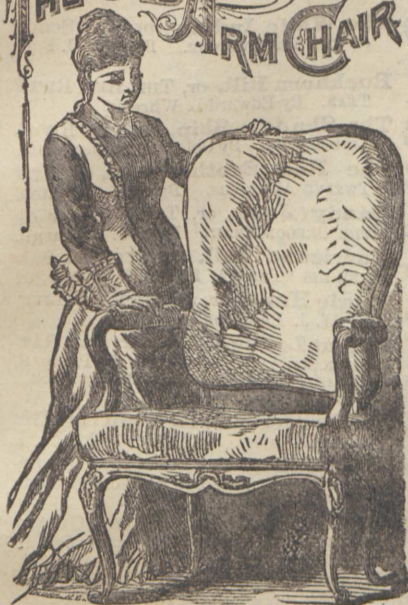
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